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THE POT OF BASIL

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THE POT OF BASIL

BY
BERNARD CAPES

AUTHOR OF
"A JAY OF ITALY," "BAG AND BAGGAGE," "JESSIE BAZLEY.

LONDON
CONSTABLE & COMPANY LTD.

1913

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NOTE

FOR the attempt here made to endue with life and circumstance a little tragic romance of the past, the motive is to be referred to a recently published book of memoirs, in whose pages is incidentally made public for the first time the brief legend of which this is an amplification. The author hopes that he will not be thought to have dealt profanely with the spirit of a little tale, so old, so new, and yet so touching in its eternal simplicity.

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THE POT OF BASIL

"Fair Isabel : poor simple Isabel."

CHAPTER I

THE NIXIE

IT was a very hot day in Colorno, the petty Versailles of the Dukes of Parma. The little channels irrigating the plains all about, and drawn every one from the near depleted basin of the small river which a few miles northward ran into the Po, were spun as thin as silver wire. The effect from a distance was as of a network of snail-tracks, stiffened in a dry morning, and all making for the oasis of the village, where was to be found at least the shade of trees and gardens. Elsewhere there was little. The domains of Don Philip, wrote the Minister Maulevrier, *à propos* some hounds "de toute beauté" presented to the duke by his devoted father-in-law, Louis XV., were no huntsman's paradise, since they possessed "ni bois, ni fauve." The country was like a green tray, rimmed by the low blue ramparts of the Alps and Apennines far distant. In the midst stood Colorno, a dainty confection, as it were, of puff paste and sugar. It lay basking in the sunlight, very white, very sleepy,

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very empty. Its duke and court were at the capital, ten miles southward, Madame Louise-Elizabeth, its restless scheming duchess, was hastening towards her cruel end at Versailles—she was to die, like her father, like her husband, like her son, like many another relation, of the common scourge, “*la petite vérole*”—and only the three children of the marriage remained ensconced, for purposes of health and education, at the “*résidence d’été*.”

This country house, “*élégante et spacieuse*,” this Colorno itself, are very meet in these days to point the moral of vainglory. The palace, where the “*Well-beloved’s*” eldest and only married daughter wasted her heart and her brains in the persistent endeavour to find kingdoms for her offspring, as lesser mothers try to find “*situations*” for theirs, the despised home, where “*ne cesse de parcourir la carte d’Europe*,” chasing this or that crown to its imaginary resting-place on the head of husband or child, has been transformed into a lunatic asylum; the balcony, whence our Juliet leaned to whisper honeyed phrases to her Romeo, is either gone, or witnesses to the rhapsodies of a baser madness; the contiguous houses, where officers and ministers and envoys plenipotentiary kept their state, the lodgings where the smaller fry of parasites and courtiers worried out their little excited lives of intrigue and scandal—all are delivered in this twentieth century to the dry prose of commerce, and only the gilt tracery on a wall here and there, or the sombre

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emblazonment of a ceiling, testifies to the romance which once glowed and fevered there until it perished consumed in its own heart-burnings.

The palace has achieved, one might say, its logical destiny ; it survives, but in a bad state of repair mental and material. The ducal gardens also survive, but for the benefit of the " people." Everywhere, since those days, the flood of democracy has broken through the social dam, and robbed exclusiveness of its most picturesque privileges. It was predestined, it was inevitable ; but I prefer, I confess, for my part, to think of Colorno as it lay slumbering, before the vulgarising cataclysm, on that sultry June morning in the year 1759.

There came lumbering up the high road from Florence a great travelling carriage drawn by four bays, with a sober-suited postilion to each pair, and a couple of travellers, no more, within. One might have known that the younger of these men—though plainly enough dressed in a suit of black velvet, with his head in a powdered bag-wig and a simple black beaver set on it—was, from the very serene authority of his expression, a person of particular distinction. He was, in fact, the Archduke Joseph of Austria, heir-apparent to God knew what dominions (the Seven Years' War was then in the fourth of its perennial stages), and on his way home from a minor diplomatic mission—with which, despite his youth, he had been entrusted—to the Court of Rome. He travelled incognito as the Comte de Falckenstein,

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and, for the moment, had elected to eschew display. His entourage, his personal equipage, had preceded him on the road ; he himself desired to lag a little for purposes of observation. For he was always observing, was Archduke Joseph, and provisionally amending the scheme of things after a process, despotically philosophic, which was all his own.

The archduke, *aetat.* 18, concluded a pretty prolonged silence with an aphorism :—

“ The last acquirement of ambitious minds, my good Tiretta, is simplicity.”

The gentleman at his side, a humorous, interesting-looking young man of twenty-six or so, heaved a profound sigh.

“ At last ! ” he said. “ I may talk, then, again ? ”

Joseph sniggered. His own lean young face was not without humour, but intrinsically of the pedantic order. He was precociously inclined to that form of superior banter, best described as scholastic jocosity, which consists in demanding subservient laughter from the unamused. That was largely the misfortune of his state. He was a serious, well-intentioned young prince ; but since no one might question his conclusions, they were forced to be their own single support. He had Platonic ideals of state, but the individual liberty they embraced included no right to question his personal dictation of them. He would make men tolerant by intolerance, which was exactly what the Jacobins, by savager methods, came to attempt ; and necessarily like them he

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failed. He meant very well, and, under the circumstances, did not do so badly in the end ; but he died, after all, in the van of pathetic failure, seeing all his hopes of a world converted by force to reason overthrown. That, however, belongs to another story.

The archduke's aphorism had capped some discussion, terminated by himself, on the notorious dandyism of the Duke of Parma, through whose territories they were then passing.

" You may talk, Tiretta," he said. " Why not ? "

" God and your Highness know," answered the young gentleman. " I would rather go without food than speech any day. And yet you impose silence on me ; and yet you condescend to call me your friend."

He was a romantic-looking fellow, for all the character he gave himself—slender, shapely, with dusk mournful eyes and well-knit features. His mouth was peculiarly expressive, whether in smile or sobriety, and the voice, whose freedom he so coveted, was low-toned and caressing. He wore the nondescript military harness of his day, scarcely to be called a uniform, consisting prominently of a dark blue coat with white facings, high jack-boots, and a heavy sword at his side. His natural hair, of a deep brown and slightly grizzled with powder, was tied into a knot at the nape with a broad black ribbon, and on his head was a hat like his companion's, but adorned with a pert black cockade.

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"I am your friend, Tiretta," said the prince. "That is why I will not let you talk too much. You will profit by it some day, when I have inured you to a wise reticence. The man of many words empties his heart of thoughts."

"I could plead," answered Tiretta, with a little curious amused glance at his companion, "that thoughts, like pea-blossom, throng the thicker being culled; only I fear——"

"Fear what?"

"That you would wish to think it over."

Joseph laughed. "Well," said he, "deliver yourself."

"I can be reticent," said Tiretta. "I will talk your Highness an hour by the clock to prove it; and all the time you will never guess the secret I am keeping from you."

"What is that?"

"That you have a smut on your nose."

The prince instinctively rubbed that august feature; then, his lips a little stiff, sat looking out of the window. Certainly his indulgence had brought this on himself. He had met and attached this Tiretta to his interests in Rome, where the stranger was known socially as *il Trovatore*. Already and always a student of humanity, there was something about the man, a mystery, a charm, which had curiously puzzled and attracted the royal young metaphysician. Not that Tiretta had made any mystery about himself. If he was a soldier of

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fortune, he was still a soldier and a gentleman. He had fought with distinction, on the Spanish side, in the wars of the Austrian succession ; he had been present at the battle of Piacenza. It was nothing, in that " general post " of kingdoms and dynasties, that he should find himself presently hobnobbing on friendly terms with a scion of the house whose claims he had helped to contest. The European arena was all a welter of Habsburgs and Bourbons, crossing, interlacing, intermarrying, and having no particular aim in common but, like a litter of pigs, to empty among them the Continental trough. It did not seem much to matter which sat on what throne, so long as all available seats were occupied by themselves. A martial spirit, with no genius for genealogy, might very well, under such conditions, fight for the sake of his sword rather than his cause ; and likely that had been the case with Tiretta. He was a mercenary, of the noble and romantic sort ; a free-lance, whose independence of mind shone through all his undertakings. There is no permanence in the attachments of princes ; but, for the moment at least, it was this very quality of " self-possession " in his friend which interested Joseph ; and because it seemed the antithesis of his own. Tiretta possessed *his* own soul apart, not by philosophy, but by some secret bestowal of it in a dreamy Rosamund's bower, to which only he knew the clue. When his eyes looked fixed and misty, one might surmise that he was far away in that

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enchanted spot, the spirit of which always appeared to speak in his voice and manner. There was something magnetic about the man, which, in the philosopher's view, invited scientific analysis.

And yet the fellow was an irrepressible chatterer—that was the odd thing; and wont, like all chatterers, to blunder into offence. Here was an example.

Archduke Joseph tried to swallow the pleasantry, but his vanity was not equal to the effort. He swelled a moment, then delivered himself, with an icy *hauteur* :—

“ You presume, monsieur, you presume upon my indulgence. That is not to justify my condescension, but to rebuke it. Henceforth I desire you to leave me to my meditations.”

Tiretta, instantly compunctious, ventured to disobey. He was easily attached; he really liked the young man. His expressions of contrition won favour after a time; he earnestly asserted that he was not the irresponsible garrulous magpie the other thought him—that in the causes of loyalty and affection he could be silent unto death. Let his Highness test him and believe. Joseph smiled. Too much protest, too many words.

“ I mistrust all excess—even of fidelity,” he said.

“ Your Highness begins, your Highness has said it,” cried Tiretta, “ where ordinarily old age is content to end—in the last wisdom of simplicity. Be tolerant of us commoner minds, who, being little,

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cannot afford, like your Highness, to do without some ostentation, even in speech. An emperor can dress plain, can dismiss his escort, can sit in silence self-contained, and remain an emperor. But we must e'en have some garnish of embroidered coats and sounding words to recommend us. Well, talking, like drink, grows on a man. So you give me your liking, sum me up as a wind-bag, only a fond one."

"I shall do nothing so foolish," said Joseph, with a smile. "There is no human nature, my good Tiretta, compounded of such simple ingredients. To call a man a rogue, a fool, a miser, or what you will, is the mere refuge of an indolent mind, which seizes upon some salient feature to express the whole. Remark upon a man's dandyism, as we have been doing, but do not call him dandy; remark upon another's loquacity, but do not dismiss him as an empty chatterer."

"Do not dismiss him at all," said Tiretta gravely. "He will justify your interest in him yet."

He chaunted softly a little odd song (they were rolling over smooth turf at the time)—something about a quarrel between a flower and its roots, which he improvised for the occasion. It was his faculty for doing this sort of thing which had procured him his name. He had a very sweet voice. His mandolin rested in its case in the rack above his head. Joseph had little ear or liking for music; yet there was a quality in Tiretta's which constantly fascinated while it aggravated him.

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"If you would condescend to prose," he said drily.

"It was this," said Tiretta. "The flower despised its own lowly roots, its poor relations, which connected it with the soil. 'I would stand alone in my exclusiveness,' it said; and it persuaded the scythe to sever it. But, lo! the flower fell and died, and the roots sent forth another blossom, fair as the first."

The archduke patted the shoulder next him patronisingly.

"What does it mean, poet?"

"Nothing, sir, but that, stand a flower ever so high and glorious, the roots have their use. All life springs at one time from the soil."

"What is the moral?"

"O! the moral? Only that I love flowers."

"Well, you are a funny fellow."

"For being a root? It is natural for you to think so. But I shall hope yet to prove my attachment."

The prince glanced at him queerly, as if doubting his sanity; then frowned, and sat looking from the window.

The postilions had had orders to avoid both Parma and Colorno. There were private as well as state reasons for this step. The past month or so had been signalised by some cautious *pourparlers* in the matter of a suggested marriage between the heir to the Austrian throne and the eldest child and daughter of Don Philip, and both policy and punctilio forbade

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a visit which might lend itself to misconstruction. If any curiosity as to the person of his possible bride affected the sedate young gentleman, he had no difficulty in repressing it. A glimpse had perhaps acted upon him to rasher effect. For, for all his youthful philosophy, Joseph was susceptible where girlish beauty was concerned. He even fell in love, years later, with the looks of his own sister, Marie-Antoinette, at Versailles, and playfully regretted that he could not marry her. Reports, of course, of the charms of the young Infanta Marie-Isabelle, had reached him ; but then he was wise enough to recognise that princesses were always beautiful. It was without emotion that he saw the roofs and towers of Colorno appear and disappear at a distance among the eastern greenery.

The carriage took a ford of the little river, and toiling up the slope beyond, was proceeding on its way to join the Milan road, when it was called to a sudden halt by the archduke.

“ Tiretta ! ”

“ Your Highness ? ”

“ That was a bewitching vision.”

“ It sits very prettily among its trees, to be sure.”

“ Pooh, man ! Get out and look back.”

Tiretta obeyed—and this is what he saw. The road ran straight across the river, and within the south-eastern angle made by the two was composed a little picture, very quaint and *ravissante*. It showed a leafy corner shadowed by chestnut trees,

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and a patch of green-embowered turf beyond, sloping to a tiny curved backwater, in which lay a miniature islet set like an aquamarine in a ring, the whole lying secluded from the road behind a high close hedge of tamarisk and juniper, in the thick of which was sunk a wooden wicket. But between the bank and islet was the wonder ; for there, thigh-deep in the water, stood a young girl, plainly arrested in the act of reaching for a single golden lily which floated in the pool a yard or two beyond her grasp. There she stood, half diverted, half aghast, balancing herself by an overhanging branch, one slim arm raised, so that its sleeve dropped down almost to her arm-pit, the other, snatched hurriedly from its essay, pressing under to her knees her rebellious skirt, which yet would rise and rise again in snowy bubbles. The naiad's umber hair had looped astray ; the little milkmaid hat upon her head, with its cherry ribbon and saucy bow, was tilted askew ; she stood transfixed a moment ; then, with a laugh and shrug, turned and waded ashore.

An odd small face, peering from the green, greeted her. Then both disappeared, and only the swirling bobbing lily remained to tell of the picture.

A voice spoke at Tiretta's side. The archduke had alighted.

"Fantastic, lovely—a spirit of the beautiful water. How the sun and shade fought for her face, her bosom ! Tiretta."

"Sir."

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"I would not willingly forget that vision. See, take this ring" (he pulled a green intaglio from his finger)—"carry it to her; say that the Count of Falckenstein presents his duty to the nixie of the pool, and begs her to accept of this gage in token of his thralldom. No delay—not a moment—or you will be too late."

Tiretta, in his jack-boots, splashed back across the ford. He found the wicket unfastened, and entered; a short hedgy lane carried him to the chestnut trees and the patch of sward over against the islet. He half expected to find the apparition vanished beyond recall—a dream, an hallucination. But there she stood withdrawn into the green, a flushed and laughing reality. Her sodden skirts clung about her; they were hemmed with mud as if, a lily herself, she had been uprooted from the water; her raised hands sought to restore symmetry to her disordered locks; there was a gleam of snowy teeth, a flush of translucent rose—he thought he had never seen a picture so captivating. And hovering about the vision's footsteps was a little grotesque boy, comical, preposterous—a dwarf in fantastic keeping.

He advanced; she saw him, and was stricken into a stone-eyed Undine.

"Madam," he said, "I bring a gage from the Count of Falckenstein yonder to the nixie of the water. He bids me say that he will redeem it at her will."

CHAPTER II

AQUAVIVA

IF we are to accept the testimony of Louis XV., an experienced judge in such matters, the beauty of his granddaughter, eldest child of Don Philip of Parma, was in need of no servile flattery to recommend it. The little Infanta was, in truth, at seventeen, most that heart could desire, sweet, unaffected, full of charm and playfulness. Indeed, in the eyes of some, she erred on the side of condescension, being a little disposed, like her father, to familiarity with her inferiors. Yet, on right occasion, she could assume a pretty air of dignity, consciously summoned, one might think, to the protection of a yielding over-lovable disposition. She could not bear to hurt ; and though she was wilful, and possessed, and could not always resist the temptation to indulge, a strong sense of humour, her atonements generally more than expiated the faults that induced them. To men, her eyes seemed always asking pardon for the cruelty of their own kindness.

The pretty princess was born in December. She arrived, "when all sweets were over, to bless the year," even like our own little princess Elizabeth,

AQUAVIVA

who came with the snow one Childermas day, and passed away with it, like other holy innocents, in her brief spring. Isabella's full name was Isabelle Marie Louise Antoinette—either so, or written in Italian, or Spanish, as you please. To her kinsfolk she was always Isabelita. They spoke French for the most part in Parma; for although Don Philip was a son of the fifth haughty monarch of that name of Spain, his royal spouse was by far the more forceful spirit of the pair, a true and steadfast daughter of France, and her will and tastes prevailed above those of her vain good-natured husband. Wherefore it was that this twelfth year of the duke's enjoyment of his Italian possessions found the court largely weeded of its original Spanish dependants, and savouring more of Paris than of Madrid in its councils and pastimes.

Isabella commonly spoke French; and so, through long habit of resignation, did her *gouvernante*, the Marquise de Gonzalès, a fat old *rabâcheuse*, who, wishful long ago to escape this tiresome servitude of hers, had only been induced to stay on in view of the inability of the ducal exchequer to settle her account. She was a twaddling, scandalmongering old woman, who “*passait pour aimer l'intrigue*”—not the best mentor for an impressionable young girl, one would think. But, indeed, the old lady's wits were never the servants of her inclinations, and I think Isabella measured her fairly enough, her pretence and her harmlessness, and was never, though she dutifully

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submitted, more or less, to her duennaship, in the least danger of imbibing from her principles derogatory to her maidenhood. At the same time the girl, not ignorant of the financial difficulties which had almost persistently beset the duchy, was prepared to suffer sweetly enough the almost arrogant show of authority which the Marquise's consciousness of grievance emboldened her to assume.

The two drove out one fair June morning to visit the gardens of the queer old Aquaviva, a whimsical *protégé* of the young lady. They lay, these gardens, a mile or two from Colorno, along the right bank of the little river Parma, and were designed for nothing else than the production of perfumery. The *gouvernante*, hot and languid, elected to remain in the carriage under the shadow of a friendly group of trees; so Isabella alighted alone. She had hardly entered the garden, through a green gate in a hedge, before she was launched upon a very wilderness of flowers. Or at least so it might have appeared to one who knew nothing of the inner economics of that profuse and dazzling disorder. Here were roses, not by the bed but by the acre, bickering flame, as the heat-haze dances from the ground, of orange and crimson and scarlet; fields of jasmine in orderly rows, knitted in like hop-binds with horizontal stakes, and loading the air with perfume; plantations of yellow cassia, of jonquil, of tuberose, of geranium, each, on inspection, seen to be differentiated from all others, the whole forming

AQUAVIVA

a vast mosaic of flower groups, whose pattern symbolised the triumph of Aquaviva over some natural conditions obstructive of his enterprise. For Aquaviva, transferring at one time his little capital and his extensive knowledge from the flower-farms of Grasse in the Cannes Valley, where he had been horticulturally educated, to his native plains of Colorno, which were quite a degree higher in latitude, had had to circumvent and conquer many difficulties before establishing his gardens on the productive footing which was to make of them something more than a joy to the eye and a feast to the nostrils.

Isabella walked on, steeped, half drugged in the scents, which rose like incense on all sides. There were men working here and there, bronzed Italian *lavoranti*, who uncapped to Madonna as she passed, and felt the sweet place sweeter for her presence. She knew all its intricacies and details—the sheds for raising seed, the pergolas, the nurseries, the sunk tanks of water alive with wriggling gnat-larvæ, the little gleaming channels interlacing all. There was something about the riotous profusion of the spot, so greenly remote from the formal alleys and studied perspectives of Colorno, which touched a strange nerve in her as of some shadowy remembrance, the mystery of antique forgotten things. She loved it; and its owner and presiding genius, whom the marquise patronised and detested, was a prime favourite of hers.

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Wending her way, everywhere by great bushes of lavender and rosemary, she came presently upon the old gardener himself, busy near the laboratory, a central bungalow where were achieved the processes of *macération* and *enfleurage*—otherwise the capture and storage of the world of fugitive perfumes which diffused themselves around. Aquaviva carried in his sinewy arms a pile of glazed stretchers, like small window sashes, or, a more appropriate simile in these days, like large photographic printing frames, and, seeing Isabella, he paused with a sardonic pucker of the lips.

“ Ah ! ” said he, “ I could have sworn it. A right morning for gadflies.”

His *torso* was like a lean-bellied fiddle, the string which bound his green baize apron round his waist helping the resemblance. Great bent shoulders and thin bent shanks had he, with enormous shoes to his feet and an enormous aquiline nose to his face. His expression was by no means truckling or conciliatory ; he knew his value with the dames and exquisites of Parma.

Isabella laughed : “ O, grandfather ! ” she said, “ is that the way to greet your princess ? See how I sting you with honey for your rudeness.”

“ Hey,” said the old man, “ hoping to make me drop my frames ? But beware. It is the treasure of a dukedom I carry within them.”

She stretched up, and pulled at a frame, trying to peep.

AQUAVIVA

“What is it, avolo mio? Is it lilies, jasmine, violets?”

“It is not for the common ruck. I tell you it is of the ducal brand—the essence of all flowers in one.”

“It is tuberosé.”

“Spoken, Madonna, like an intelligent daughter. Between us we shall guess, sooner or later, what is his Excellency’s favourite perfume.”

“Why this is it, is it not?”

“Capital, on my faith. She has guessed it already.”

“Grandfather, I do not like you. I shall be severe. Tell me at once, is the grease on which these flowers are spread well purified in boiling water and nitre?”

“It is well purified, Madonna.”

“Has it since been boiled in a solution of rose-water and benzoin?”

“That is so, Madonna.” He answered with an amused, approving grin.

“And was the grease originally of choice selection?”

“The most choice, Madonna. The butcher who provided the ox who provided the suet is fourth cousin to a saint. The odour of sanctity is over it all from the first.”

“That is very good, then. My father will like to acquire sanctity so easily and so pleasantly.”

“True; on his handkerchief. But Madonna forgets one thing. The fat, thus impregnated, has

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to be dissolved in alcohol, a very devilish liquor, before the fragrance is released from it. Wherefore sanctity does not count in the result."

"I was forgetting. So, after all, you brew wicked concoctions, grandfather. I shall ask to have you put in the escalero."

"Not you. You would not hurt a beetle. Besides, where then would you get your scents?"

"I would distil them from the simple flowers."

"Pooh! That is what fools imagine. But flowers do not yield their essence to torture, any more than truth comes out of the escalero."

"I did not mean it really."

Aquaviva looked at the girl with a grim smile, and wagged his head.

"You holy love!" he said. "How long are you going to keep me in torment with this load?"

She moved, with an exclamation of remorse, to let him pass. Going before her, he deposited his armful of frames within the bungalow, where were already heaped some scores of others.

"Now," said he, turning round and rubbing his arms; "repeat your lesson, profumiere."

She put her hands behind her back, as she stood before him.

"I boil and refine my grease," she said, "in the flowerless time, storing ready a great quantity of it. When the flowers come, each in its season, I gather them and place them on these frames, every one of which is smeared thick with the fat, which has the

AQUAVIVA

property of absorbing their fragrance. I pile these frames one on the other to the number of—O, the heaps that you see there ; and leave them thus, the light and heat penetrating, for——”

“ Go on.”

“ Ever so long a time.”

“ From twenty-four to thirty-six hours will do.”

“ That is what I meant. When the flowers have yielded all they can, I remove them and put fresh ones, and so on until the fat is so fully charged with their fragrance that it can hold no more. I then scrape off the grease, heat it until liquid, then strain it and pour it into bottles, ready for treatment by the perfumers, with their—with their alcohol.”

“ Capital. Madonna has my certificate. And now about macération ? ”

“ That is steeping the flowers in cold olive oil. Some, like cassia, answer better to such treatment.”

“ Excellent ! And so do not talk to me any more about your distillation, which is an inferior process applied only to the leaves, seeds and other parts of perfume-bearing plants, and in its results resembles no more the sweet breath of the blossoms than your ladyship’s vulgar camériste, Fanchette Becquet, resembles your ladyship.”

“ Grandfather ! What do you know about Fanchette ? ”

“ Only what Bissy has told me, Madonna.”

“ And what does Bissy know ? ”

THE POT OF BASIL

"Ask him. He has all the wisdom of an owl. You did not come here unattended?"

"Madame de Gonzalès drove with me. She is sleeping in the carriage."

"I warrant it, the old sluggard. If they shot women, she would be riddled like a pepper-box for a false sentry."

"You must not speak so of my *gouvernante*."

"Well, I will not. If it comes to that, I could forgive all Spaniards for your sake."

Isabella turned, her slim tallish young figure suddenly erect.

"I will go and look for Bissy," she said stiffly.

"You will find him in the orange-grove," called Aquaviva, and returned, grinning, to his work.

Isabella had one of those small revulsions of feeling which sometimes came to her when, it seemed, her natural kindness had been presumed upon. But the mood passed quickly, as she walked beside the beds of flowers. She did not like to think of these pure things yielding their essence to fat; yet, after all, it was an emollient process, not unlike the susceptibility of her sex to soft flattery. She wondered if to lie on a bed of suet would have a persuasive effect upon her own soul, coaxing it to part with its fondest secrets; she was quite sure that distillation by boiling would have the opposite effect. Gardeners certainly were very wise people; they had learned the value of cold oil over hot in extracting the truth from shy natures. How cruel

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the world was ! Would it ever learn in her time the illogic of torture ?

Archduke Joseph, in his carriage not so far away, was already unconsciously formulating in his mind a like proposition. But he lived to answer it in an enlightened fashion.

The orange grove was Aquaviva's pride. He had nursed it through long years into a flourishing condition ; for in those latitudes, where snow often fell thickly in the winter, it was no easy task to protect and cherish the sensitive trees. The grove was situated in a little green glade near the river. So enclosed was it within trees and juniper hedges, so hushed and fragrant were its depths, one might have thought oneself in an antique bower sacred to love—a place where silence itself stole into blossom, and needed no more than the shock of a butterfly's entrance to shatter it into a myriad scented stars. So still was it that the bubbling coo of a dove, the plop of a fish in the stream hard by, sounded, when they sounded, almost discordant. For true it is that noise, like size, is relative. The man who lives amongst engines can find balm of nights in " barking dogs and crowing cocks " ; a student in a voiceless hermitage is driven to madness by a bluebottle.

The trees were all in flower ; and, as if that were not fragrance enough, the grassy floor of the grove was sown everywhere with clumps of violets, many late blossoms on which still lingered out their beauty. They too needed protection, but in another way—

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protection from the sapping sun which the others loved and monopolised. So that here were light and shadow at their sweetest.

As Isabella entered the grove, she came plump upon the minor apparition she sought—Bissy, to wit, in shirt and breeches and an enormous straw hat. He looked like a gnome, who had taken refuge from a crow under a great mushroom, and come away with it on his head. Its weight seemed to bow his little legs, withal his important spirit walked unconscious of the burden. Or, rather, stooped at the moment, for Bissy, hands on knees, was peering intently into a violet patch, a basket of blossoms standing on the grass by his side.

Bissy, incidentally, was Aquaviva's grandson and only relative. He was presumably a boy, but of unknown age. His squeezed elfin face showed the gravity of a man of forty. He took himself immensely seriously, regarding the flower-farm as his heritage, invited or merited no rebuke, worked solemnly within his limits, and took no fantastic risks. And yet the boy was in him somewhere, as naughty Isabella loved to prove by probing. It was just possible, so to speak, to scratch the horticulturist and find the mudlark.

"Bissy," she said, a twinkle in her eyes: "what do you know of Fanchette Becquet?"

The imp did not even start. He just looked inquiringly round with his large owlsh eyes, then straightened himself to his four foot six of stature.

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"It is blood that amuses Mamselle Fanchette," he answered promptly. "That is what I know about her, Excellency."

"Blood, you nasty boy!" cried the young lady, with a little nose of disgust.

"Look you, Madonna," said Bissy; "I know what I say. She comes to see the gardens once or twice, and to praise the scents—to ask them too: a little rose-water for her kerchief, some geraniums to put in her bosom, a spray of rosemary for her garters. She is a poor maid; her salary is paid irregularly—which I do not believe; she will justify the gift through her recommendations. But that is all nothing to her passion for the orange-grove. I tell her what I will tell you about these trees. They are grafted on a stock of lemon; they are planted in a good clayey soil, enriched with both animal manure and rotted leaf-mould; their roots are ventilated with plenty of broken charcoal. But since they are gross feeders, there is something else. It is blood from the butchers that they are greedy at times to drink; and it is that which pleases Mamselle Fanchette. Her eyes glitter like a tiger's. 'I like to hear that,' she says. 'They are brave trees, and earn their right to be the wedding tokens of women who love brave men'—and she sniffs at the blossoms as if she found a new savour in them. O, she loves blood!"

"You take a symbol for a sentiment," cried Isabella—"you do, you horrid boy. I know

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Fanchette better than you, and she would not hurt a mouse. Why do you try to spoil my pretty grove for me. I think I will never come here again."

"I should be sorry for that," said Bissy gravely.

"Then do not say such things any more. What were you peering at when I came in?"

Bissy wiped his right hand on his breeches; then nipping the lady's tender little palm in it, drew Isabella to the violet clump.

"Bend down and look in," he said.

She obeyed; and there was a monstrous toad returning her gaze. Its golden eyes stared unwinking at her; its slow throat pulsed.

"Do you know, Bissy," whispered the girl, after a moment's pause, "that he has a wonderful jewel in his head."

"Bagattella!" said Bissy. "Who told you so?"

"That is not respectful, Bissy. I know because I know—that should be enough for you. Come away, and I will tell you the reason."

She had a lively imagination, and she "made up" on the spot:—

"When the first mother ate the forbidden fruit, she found a stone in it, which her little white teeth could not crack. So she took the stone from her pretty mouth and threw it away. But it was really the stone, and not the flesh, which contained the secret of the tree of knowledge, so that she gained nothing by her disobedience, as it has always been easy to see. But a toad, being the lowliest thing

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on earth, crept, and found the stone and tried to swallow it, which it has never been able to do to this day, though you may see it all puffed and swollen with the effort. For the stone stuck in its head, where it still remains for anybody to find."

Bissy put out his underlip with polite incredulity.

"If anybody knows, anybody can have it."

"Ah!" said Isabella; "you are a very clever Bissy; but there is something more. One must not take life in recovering the stone, since it contains the principle of all life; and therefore, if you kill the toad, as you must do to gain the stone, you will find nothing for your pains."

"Which toad?" said Bissy.

"Why, this one."

"But it is not the only toad in the world."

"It is the only toad that matters to my story," said Isabella. "What a little plague you are with your questions. Come, I want to see my golden lily. Is it full out yet?"

"Yes, Madonna," said Bissy.

"I will race you there—quick—is anybody looking?"

The imp hesitated, glowed a little, then put himself in position.

"One, two, three—off!"

They ran across the grove, out of it by a green opening, and so on to the slope of sward bending to the backwater visible from the ford. Isabella, flushed and dishevelled, was first by a yard or two.

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“O!” she cried; “the love! Bissy, I must have it; Bissy, I must.”

Gravity shook its head judicial.

“There’s no way but to wade; and through the mud.”

“Wade, then.”

“I am too little; and I have no love for the water, Madonna.”

“Then I shall go myself; and you shall look on.”

“I am your servant, Madonna; it is my duty to obey.”

“O, what an excellent servant! He will not stir from his post, though I drown.”

Laughing and wilful she stepped into the water, staggered a little, found her balance and went cautiously forward. The mud sucked at her dainty shoes, captured one, and still she was not deterred. She had almost reached the prize, when the sound of rolling wheels broke upon her ears. She paused aghast. We have heard what followed.

CHAPTER III

THE COMPACT

EVEN as he spoke, Tiretta regretted, and blushed over, the nature of his mission. It was not its insolence—that was nothing in those days ; it was its obvious misapplication. For here was no rustic Hebe, no frolic *campagnarde*, as he had at first inclined to suppose, but a damsel of position, as seemed somehow evident from her manner. That, eloquent to him of the inexplicable shibboleth of caste, told him, being a gentleman and a Gileadite, that he had presumed. He awaited in considerable trepidation her answer.

It followed, and without hesitation, witheringly enough.

“ My will, monsieur, now and always, is to be spared the impertinences of strangers.”

If she could be more than gracious to her inferiors, Don Philip's daughter could repel crushingly the undesired approaches of her equals. Tiretta, with a thorn in his heart, could not but observe, and admire, with what grace the bedraggled little beauty commanded the situation ; how, sopped and ruffled as she was, she could triumph in her conscious indignation over unflattering circumstance. Her hair was

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tumbled, her pretty hat was awry ; her two little feet peeped from their muddy fringe, and one had no shoe on it ; yet, booted and martial as he was, she could make him feel his inferiority in a way that was at once a charm and a humiliation.

“ Impertinence, madam,” he said, “ is the last thing I made myself deputy for. If——”

She interrupted him : “ You know the terms of your own service, monsieur, better than I. I would accept the lesser dishonour, if I were you, and go without more words.”

He flushed up to the roots of his hair.

“ Do you see this, madam ? ” he said. He held out the green intaglio. “ I fling it from me as I do your unpardonable innuendo ”—and he spun the accursed thing from him into the middle of the pool.

Isabella, paralysed an instant, the next turned her back on him.

“ Come, Bissy,” she said, “ I need a gentleman escort, and you shall be mine to the carriage.”

But Bissy hung back. His eyes were fixed on the pool, his thoughts on the covetable plunder so wantonly—or happily—committed to it. Was it conceivable a man might dare for profit what he had refused to gallantry ? The ring had shone and looked heavy ; the water in the creek was daily sinking. And, even while he pondered, Madam de Gonzalès, flushed and peevish, hove into view, followed by Aquaviva in a state of dancing irritation.

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The *gouvernante* paused, in heavy wonder over the tableau presented.

"Heyday!" she said: "What is the meaning of all this? Cannot I close my eyes a moment but you must be forgetting yourself and your position, little Infanta of Spain? An endless, insufferable task for one, is it not?" Her thick-lidded eyes travelled from Isabella to the stranger, and back again. "Who is this, and what have you been doing? My God, a fine state you are in! All dumb and confounded, too. Fie, fie, girl—don't tell me it is an assignation!" She wheeled round on Aquaviva, red with fury. "It is a trick, is it? You have been throwing dust in my eyes, you infamous old scoundrel? You have been lending yourself to this tryst on the pretence of instructing her Excellency in horticulture."

"Dust!" roared the old man. "It is the dust you yourself raise that blinds you. What do you all mean interfering with my work and disturbing the peace of my garden. I want nothing more than to be rid of the lot of you."

"Isabella!" cried the *gouvernante*.

"I answer for myself, madam," said the girl, her face quite pale and set; "and never, you may be sure, but with silence to insult. I am sorry you are displeased with my state, but——"

"Your father, the duke, shall hear of it," cried the old lady.

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“ I will tell him myself,” said Isabella, “ and of your interpretation of it.”

“ It is a natural one, is it not ? ” said madam, but with a falling face.

“ To the Marquise de Gonzalès,” said Isabella. “ Shall we return to the carriage, madam ? ”

Tiretta, with a fine red on his cheek, came forward.

“ I, also,” he said, “ desire to answer for myself. The Count of Falckenstein——”

“ Eh ! ” cried the marquise, with a little whisk and start.

“ I said the Count of Falckenstein, madam, happening to cross yonder ford a few minutes ago on his road to Milan, encountered the vision of a nymph exploring these waters knee-deep in quest of lilies, and sent me with a compliment to greet the subject of so charming a picture That, upon my honour, constitutes my share in this ‘ assignation.’ ”

The old dame’s face, while Tiretta spoke, was a study. Perplexity struggled there with amazement and relief. She laughed, as he finished, on a little high note of understanding and indulgence.

“ And it was very natural of his Excellency,” she said. “ I, for one, decline to blame him for it. When rank forgets itself in such naughty vagaries as miss’s here, it must look to be accepted by strangers at its own valuation. Luckily, as you will please to inform the count, the like of this is with her Excellency a rare ebullition. She can do justice to her training, as you have heard ; and I,

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though made the victim of the principles I have inculcated, can rejoice, at least, in such vindication of my teaching."

She dropped, or rather heaved, a profound curtsey; and Tiretta bowed as profoundly—an obeisance in which he sought to include, furious as he was at heart, the object of this jobation. But Isabella, standing pale and haughty, was very far from responding.

"An apology, madam!" she said—"from us! He will please to inform the count! I think I have not heard you aright."

"Pooh, child!" said the marquise good-humouredly. "You have heard; and I have heard. But it is possible we may draw different conclusions. Bon voyage, monsieur. We had some news of his Excellency's passing."

Tiretta rejoined his travelling companion, who during all this time had been chafing in his inability to detect what was passing within the enshrouding coverture of foliage. The archduke greeted him with some impatience.

"Well," he said. "Did beauty accept the gage?"

"The gage," said Tiretta, "lies sunk and damned to all eternity within the pool."

"She threw it there?"

"I threw it there."

"You, sir?"

"I, your Highness; and may you be damned

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with it before I consent ever again to risk being mistaken for your pander."

The prince, shrinking amazed a moment as if he had been struck, stalked to the carriage, entered it, and sat down.

"Shall I walk?" said Tiretta, grimly, at the door.

The other hesitated; then silently, peremptorily, touched the seat beside him. Tiretta, without a word, occupied it, and the carriage rolled on its way.

Presently, urged beyond endurance, Joseph spoke.

"This is very amusing. You would appear to have met with some rebuff. Surely, in so harmless a gallantry, you would not blame me for consequences quite unforeseen. Is it injured vanity, or another's innuendo, that saddles you with that hurtful title."

"Another's innuendo," said the soldier shortly.

"The lady's?"

"The lady's."

"She said?"

"She said, what the Infanta Isabella, daughter of Don Philip, was privileged to say to a poor devil approaching her with that insult in his hand."

"It was the Infanta?"

"It was the Infanta."

"Tiretta, my dear friend, tell me exactly what were her words?"

"She desired, sir, to be spared the impertinences of strangers; and when I answered with the respect-

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ful gallantry of my mission, she retorted as only a woman can retort with impunity."

"A woman! Yet the vision of that child! I am sorry for you, Tiretta—and I am sorry for myself."

"You have need to be."

"Why? Did she know me for whom I was?"

"I can answer for the marquise; I cannot answer for her. Likely not; and, if likely, happily not; else I think you would find her more woman than child if you came to woo. Be content for that, if it pleases you. I do not fancy, from what I noticed, that the marquise will enlighten her. You can be sorry, provisionally, nevertheless."

The young archduke gloomed, and was silent for a while. It was not that he resented the other's freedom. Tiretta was constituted his privileged favourite for the time being, and might speak his mind liberally on most matters. It was rather, perhaps, that he cogitated the invidious position of princes, who, having austere far-seeing mothers to arrange matches for them, must accommodate themselves at bidding to double leading-strings, without being given a choice as to the partner with whom they were destined to run in couple. It made no difference that inclination in himself might jump with another's policy. He would have wished to be free to woo in the sense that Tiretta, being of the small and independent, meant it. He did not fear the issue; he only coveted the free-will which would

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have lent a glamour to the pursuit. What if, after all, he were to find himself bound to one predisposed against him? He wished that she knew him, and knew him better; so, for the time at least, had that rebellious vision wrought upon his emotions. Presently, with a sigh, he looked up.

"She struck me as very beautiful, Tiretta," he said.

"Well, I am prejudiced," answered the soldier drily. "I cannot admire unkindness."

"That is to be the true child you are," said Joseph. "Affection is the only beauty to a child's perceptions. Besides, you are not very susceptible, I think, to feminine attractions. I have observed that in you."

"O! have you?"

"Come, Tiretta man, cheer up. After all, the young lady's vindication of her position was the commendable thing. One might have regarded her escapade otherwise in a less admiring light."

"So the keeper, no doubt, counsels resignation to the poor wretch he has caught and mauled in a mantrap."

Joseph laughed. He thought the comparison, in their relative positions, ridiculous. Of course he did. What importance had this dear fellow's feelings in the context? The point was that he himself might have been misrepresented to the lady.

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Following that train of thought, he fell into a profound meditation, from which he did not rouse himself for several minutes. Then he stirred, like a man who had come to a conclusion which was to be immutable and final.

"I wish," said he, "satisfaction on a point or two—as to whether, for instance, that escapade argued a characteristic lack of dignity on the lady's part, or was due merely to a rare ebullition of high spirits, instigated possibly by opposition."

"Yes," said Tiretta.

"I wish, if properly assured on that question, to ascertain what is the lady's real opinion of me, and if she was led in any way to associate my near presence with the episode."

"Yes," said Tiretta.

"I am not a bad fellow," said Joseph. "Am I, Tiretta?"

"You are a very good fellow," answered the soldier grumpily.

"And I am not a bad friend. You, too, are a good friend—one, I am sure, who would be glad to explain his comrade in the best light to one whose good opinion his comrade coveted."

Tiretta did not answer for a moment. His eyebrows were a little up, his lips a little compressed. Presently he opened them.

"Let us speak without equivocation," he said. "You wish me to go and act the part of Paolo to your Francesca."

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Joseph smiled.

"To speak what your heart believes of me."

"I am to talk of the fairy prince, of his virtues, of his graces, of his capacity for romantic love and more lasting affection."

"Say the best you can of me."

"Would you not fear Paolo?"

"No, no, my friend—his duty, his loyalty, his insensibility; and much more than that."

"I flatter myself, you mean. Well, at least she would not flatter me."

"It would be your chance to prove yourself to her; to rectify false impressions. In these matters troubadours are privileged."

"Let me understand you fully. You think she *may* have formed a prejudice against you; you want that impression corrected. Are you to marry her, then?"

"It seems so."

"And how should I be accredited?"

"Leave that to me. I will see that you are given the opportunity to approach her. The rest your heart will tell you."

"We are to communicate?"

"And she and I, maybe, when you have paved the way. For friendship's sake, Tiretta."

"For none other, you may be sure. I do not like my task."

"Put it into a song—into many songs. That will lighten it for you. I wish, for the occasion, I could

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sing myself. But, in spite of policy, I will woo my own way in this."

He dismissed the subject in a little. Its temporary glamour evaporated. After all he had much, and of paramount importance, to think upon apart from it.

CHAPTER IV

LOVE'S AMBASSADOR

THE Italy of the eighteenth century has always given me a sense of distressing incongruity, such a sense of incongruity as I feel in the presence of performing animals, pitifully and patiently caricaturing their own native dignity in forced postures and mirthless habiliments. To see a petticoated elephant seated on a stool drinking tea, to see a dog on his hind legs, with a shako on his head, shouldering a musket, makes me, I confess, uneasy and ashamed. So in the land of the Visconti, of the Sforza, of the Medici, a land where both the magnificence of crime and the magnificence of achievement have always gone habited in a certain appropriate splendour, akin to that of the leopard in his forest and the tiger in his jungle, the vision of powder and patches, with their concomitants of mincing uncleanness and affectation, seems an outrage on one's conception of the accepted fitness of things. If you would study that incongruity, as at least I feel it, in its more plausible phases, turn to the finer works of Canaletto ; if in its grossest, read the memoirs of that arch-scoundrel Casanova—memoirs which to me, a

fond enough student of the period in its prettier aspects, reek with that sort of fetor which gets into one's clothes, as it were, and for a time infects all healthier savours.

The fact is, I suppose, that codes of manners and of conduct, evolved under particular conditions of society, are not always applicable to alien conditions. During the era of the aristocracy in England, powder and punctilio were some visible tokens of an amelioration in the old order of things, which had considered overbearance and pugnacity essential to the man of spirit ; they spoke a real improvement in the attitude of class towards class ; and, if that attitude was at first superficial, its practice gradually engendered the consideration which it had begun only by affecting. In Italy, it is to be feared, society adopted the code but eschewed its moral. All the observances, all the extravagances of an accepted fashion were seized upon by it with greed ; only the underlying truth was never recognised or developed. The essential inhumanity remained the same ; the arrogance of rank was unsoftened ; torture survived without a thought of its outrage, not to man but to reason. Fashion, in its baser aspects, produced, I suppose, more preposterous fops in eighteenth-century Italy than in any other country of Europe. And all because that hot, vivid Latin race had accepted the imposition of a code which was quite alien to its blood and its instincts. It was not yet ripe for the change implied. It was idle dressing-up

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for a part it did not understand. It could not, in bagwig and velvet shorts, think Garrick and play Macbeth.

It is most natural to picture the monarchs and Infantes of Spain in trunk-hose and with bristling "stiletto" beards—fierce, haughty tyrants, of a piece with the colour and fury of their times. You must picture Don Philip, however, under a very different aspect. He sits at the moment at a table in his private cabinet at Parma, a rather solemn-looking macaroni of thirty-eight, writing, like Buffon, in lace ruffles with a gold pen, and appearing more concerned over the right balance of his toupet than over the equilibrium of the European concert. You would observe, were he to rise, that he has a defect, still noticeable though mitigated by the craft of his tailor. One of his shoulders is distinctly higher than the other, which gives him, in his efforts to correct the discrepancy, a rather stiff unelastic appearance. In his younger days, he was said, by flattering chroniclers, to possess, nevertheless, a charming figure. He had also an equable temper, which, for an Infante of Spain and son of that moody monarch Philip V. and his imperious spouse Elizabeth Farnese was something to his credit. It is more to his credit now, perhaps, that, through much and prolonged test of its qualities, his temper preserves its even character. He takes life, in fact, very easily, and has no objection in the world to have his wife described, and treated, as the better horse. He is

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quite willing to take the picturesque lead in the tandem while she pulls the cart of state. After all, he has played his effective part in the achievement of their present position, and has laurels, if rather withered ones, to rest upon. He was inclined as a youth, it was said, to the study of military science ; and he has actually been a soldier, and has fought his way, and stubbornly fought it, to the enjoyment of these possessions of his, which were procured him originally through the persistent restless intriguing of his mother. Now, in the sense of prolonged security, he has grown slothful, and satisfied with minor triumphs, the greatest of which latterly has turned upon the successful nature of the negotiations for his daughter's marriage with the Austrian Crown Prince. Isabelita is, it would really appear, to be an empress some day—not so bad a match for the daughter of only a younger son of Spain. Papa is very pleased, and inclined to regard the occasion as in the nature of a personal reward for years of, comparative, privation and ducal cheese-paring. He has not, in fact, to this day succeeded in bringing the profit and loss accounts of the duchy into line.

Now, as he sits writing, he strikes us as being a thought over-bedizened for the task and the hour, which is early. Everything upon him, you will remark, is conceived according to a taste slightly in excess of that which is the northman's limit. His smooth-fronted toupet stands up eight inches from

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his forehead, and is surmounted by a roll of sausage curls, which descend to two veritable *pains à café* behind his ears ; his cravat is a very muffler of Valenciennes, and is fastened by a brooch as big as a shoe-buckle ; though presumably in *négligé*, he wears over a lace-ruffled cambric shirt, puffed from elbow to wrist, and garnished with mushroom-coloured ribbons, a pink silk vest covered with silver net ; and shoes and breeches to match, dividing a space of white silk stockings, complete the elaborate picture. The only concession to business apparent about him is his ample loose-sleeved camisole ; and even that is made of grey velvet lined with ermine. Altogether he suggests a Hogarth beau—a thing which, somewhat travestyng fact in the artist's own country, would pass for a faithful transcript here.

The room in which we discover his Excellency is small but appropriately furnished. There is a good deal of glass and glitter in it, a characteristic perfume, some bright sketches by Boucher and a Lancret *fête galante* ; and as noticeable a feature as any is a great dish of sweetmeats, having a little table of rosewood with brass mouldings to itself. The duke is writing to his wife at Versailles. He sucks a comfit as he evolves without difficulty his periods. Simple souls, often better than intellectual, write good letters : I have known an ingenuous athlete express himself with a neatness and clarity I could envy without reaching. Here are some sentences

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which I extract, as pertinent to our story, from the ducal epistle :—

“ All goes well, according to our latest advices ; and the official demand for our daughter's hand will certainly be presented to his Majesty your father within a month from this date. So far, so excellent ; and the days when, in your own phrase, we lived like ‘ragamuffins,’ are buried even to their shadows. Let us have a mass said for their souls, poor things, for they possessed some virtues. . . . We have here, lately arrived, the most popular chanteur since Farinelli. He comes, with a letter of recommendation to the Marquise de Ravilla from the archduke himself, and is to charm our daughter into love with a shadow whose approach she has dreaded a little. That suggestion is for your exclusive ear, ma mie. It emanates from one who is very cunning and very observant—the Gonzalès, no less ; and is founded upon the presumed consciousness of somebody that he had belittled himself, his rank, and his moral stature, in somebody else's eyes. You will recall that little incident of the carriage and the ford, as I passed it on to you in madam's own words. Certainly, according to her, it had its effect upon an over-sensitive nature, predisposed, perhaps, to prejudice. Somebody had already been pictured to this frank nature, it seems, in the light of a philosopher and prig. She may not associate the two—the stranger of the ford, that is to say, and the philosopher—but she may come to, or may have her

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suspensions ; and anyhow he may think that she does, and be anxious to eliminate at once a bad impression. So this Tiretta is despatched to play the part of Love's advocate with offended beauty. I do not vouch for the truth of this, or endorse its policy ; I repeat only for your private ear what the marquise of her shrewdness conjectures. She, for her part, is so sure of the truth of her surmise that she wants the man sent to Colorno, that there, amid romantic environments suggestive to the heart of contemplation, the points of his fond advocacy may be sympathetically pondered. She says that it would be flying in the face of love's providence to frustrate somebody's obvious purpose and design ; that that impression referred to—whether it concerns itself with prig or roué, or, worse still, with both—is hardly one of happy augury for the future, and calls for exceptional treatment ; that, in fine, if somebody has contrived this thing, somebody knows what he is about and has made himself responsible for his instrument.

“ In the meantime, our newly-arrived improvisatore exhibits his qualities to triumphant effect. He is a soldier and a fine man ; but this gift comes to him apart from his training, God knows whence. He will sing and rhyme you an hour on end ; and, observe, he is very flattering, though veiled, in allusions to a supreme lord and comrade who possesses his heart.”

To these passages the sick duchess answered in

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due course, and with a characteristic warning, the whole gist of which may be conveyed in a single sentence :

“ As to this minstrel, beware that the medicine, my Pippo, does not prove a drug, given for a definite purpose, but afterwards indulged in for its own sake ” —a really preposterous suggestion, which it was incumbent on a *cadet* of Spain to wave aside with the briefest comment :

“ You make me smile, dearest wife ; you positively amuse me. The man is to be regarded, like a courier, as a mere vehicle for the conveyance of an august document of the heart. He would hardly commit the absurdity, I think, of associating his own personal insignificance with the message he was employed to deliver, any more than the fiddle, could it speak, would claim to be other than a vulgar structure of wood and string, obedient only to the hand of its master, and denuded of all importance the moment that hand was withdrawn. Believe me, *ma chérie*, the percipience of the unelect is not so negligible a quantity as you would seem to imagine. This instrument—if indeed an instrument it is—will play its part with a full sense of the momentary distinction that part confers upon it, yet without a thought but of sinking thereafter into the oblivion which is its necessary destiny. If it were otherwise, there remain means to persuade it. Yet it cannot be otherwise. I think I may answer for *our* daughter that she will entertain no delusions as to the relative

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values of the hand and of the instrument upon which it plays. Which, certainly, is quite enough said upon that small subject."

Yet it was a very small subject who once crept through the keyhole of the King's treasury and robbed his Magnificence's coffers.

CHAPTER V

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ISABELLA mistrusted few people and disliked nobody for long. She was one of those happily constituted girls who are troubled with no problems, have no quarrel with destiny, and never resent their not having been born boys. She had endearing looks and a fine spirit, but without self-consciousness in the one, or arrogance in the other. She was never in arms for the prerogatives of her sex, because it never occurred to her that they were being either questioned or abused. If she coquetted at all, it was more with women than with men ; yet she was equally natural with both. As sweet a princess as Perdita—as sweet a milkmaid she would have been, had fortune deposed her. Impressionable, poor child—it was a pity only that nature, not sparing her the softest of hearts, should have done so little to protect its own rich achievement from harm. But nature, bent only on relentless propagation, designs these triumphant things as lures.

Isabella, during all her young life, had endeared herself with whomsoever she had visited. Grand-papa Louis, the cynic and impure, doted upon his *charmante* ; haughty grandmamma in Spain

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had, on her death, left her the solitary bequest devoted by that opulent lady to her lord's relations. Isabella did not want the money, but she wept over that proof of affection ; while papa Philip tried not to weep, tears of chagrin, over being left out in the cold. However, in that dismal poverty of the exchequer, something to somebody was better than nothing to nobody ; and I have no doubt that the legacy was taken into account in all subsequent dispositions of the young Infanta's " household."

Wealth, after all, is like the other things, size and sound, relative. We are not to suppose, you and I, that, because a certain thousand a year might appear to us opulence, a duke might not consider himself a pauper on fifty times that income. I do not know what the revenues of Parma represented to Don Philip in hard cash ; I do know that he was constantly and piteously complaining to his royal relatives of his embarrassments. One man's affluence is another man's necessity ; else you and I again might have criticised the expenditure of the Parmese Court, have commented on the waste, the idle profusion of a State, which, for mere vanity's sake, must boast a superfluity of service which it was inadequate to support ; have suggested a drastic economy here, a wholesale retrenchment there. We should have been assured, no doubt, that all that *could* be done *had* been done, and that only the indispensable remained—a possibly unanswerable statement from the opposite to our own point of

view. From that standpoint the emptiness of the great palace at Colorno, during the absence of the Court, was so qualified an emptiness that its superfluous inmates could still have peopled a substantial villa or two, and left something over for emergencies. Besides the personal staff, which included attendants, preceptors, valets and grooms sufficient—with a lady of the wardrobe, two *femmes de chambre*, and some minor officials attached to Isabella alone—the gardens, the stables, the kitchens, the guard-house all gave indolent occupation to a small garrison of retainers, who, mostly idle and mostly gossips, numbered amongst themselves none, perhaps, quite so pert and so voluble as Fanchette Becquet, the Infanta's first *femme de confiance*.

Fanchette, who hailed from Paris, had attained her present post more through private and particular interest than through particular merit. There were reasons for this, it was understood, which it was not necessary to divulge, but of which the girl herself was fully sensible, and of which she would have been the last not to take ample advantage. There was no high-born lady of the Court who presumed, or was allowed to presume, so much on her position as Fanchette. Her very audacity and insolence of retort possessed for certain masculine minds a charm which was a perpetual source of indulgence and profit to her. The duke himself had been known to suffer her impertinences with an enjoying relish which redounded in no ways to her disadvantage.

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In style and temper she was a veritable Parisian *mondaine*, dapper and pretty, though her lips were a little thin and her nose a little sharp. She had no heart at all, but her emotions, easily responsive to small provocation, blinded herself and others to that defect.

Fanchette one evening was "finishing" her young lady in preparation for a descent to the audience chamber—to which was coming M. du Tillot, Marquis de Felino and Secretary of State—and was taking full advantage of the licence allowed her tongue by a spoiling mistress.

"It is fortunate, is it not, your Highness," she said, with a little simper, "that somebody whom we know does not approve of rouge for ladies?"

She was daintily fitting, as she spoke, a spray of natural pink rose-buds into the silken fillet which bound the girl's unpowdered chestnut-brown hair. Isabella's laced bodice was of the simplest, meet sheath for the flower-like neck and bosom which emerged from it. A *sacque*, like a drooped petal, fell from between her shoulder-blades; her slender hips were innocent of the grotesque abomination of hoops. So she was permitted, in that court of burlesque and man-millinery, to indulge her own humorous *naïveté*. It gave her an odd distinction, not unagreeable to papa's pride. He would sternly repress any inclination detected in others to ape, servilely, that natural innocence; Isabelita should be the only sweet Arcadian in Parma. If she was

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to be Hebe in a raree show, she alone should display the delicious novelty of acting humanly, while the puppets, reversing their part, looked on and applauded. And yet, to Isabella herself, hers was no part at all, but only the most natural of instincts.

"Fanchette," she said ; " your voice sounds very demure ; or else I am very stupid. Was it weighted, or was it not, with some meaning I did not understand ? "

" Only that mademoiselle's cheek, so sensitive to sudden changes of feeling, is its own best interpreter."

" Interpreter of what, and to whom, Fanchette ? "

" Ah ! I have blundered," said the maid ; " and now I am full of confusion. It would be too daring in me to suggest."

" Well, I will not ask you to," said Isabella. " Does my cheek satisfy you now ? But it does not blush for what you think ; only to be made the target to gossips and impertinents."

" O, mademoiselle ! O, your Highness ! Let me go and weep my heart out in solitude. I have offended you, and without the least little thought of offence. O, let me go, mademoiselle ! "

" Don't be silly, Fanchette. I am not blaming you for the idle chatter you repeat. People may think what they like about rouge, without its affecting my fortunes, that is all. Sensitive ! There is nobody in the world so absurdly sensitive as yourself, I believe. Come——"

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She rose to her feet, with a coaxing smile. The maid held in her hand a little ornament of paste and silver with which she had been about to fasten the flowers into place ; Isabella took the trinket from her, and, putting an arm round the over-slim waist, tried the effect of the thing against Fanchette's own powdered locks.

" It is like sparkles of ice through mist," she said. " It suits you ever so much better than it does me. Will you accept it for your own, Fanchette, and bring me something else ? "

Fanchette sobbed, wiping an eye which yet had a covetous side-glance for the toy.

" I'm sure I meant no presumption," she gurgled ; " or to abuse the confidence your Highness reposes in me. I only thought your Highness would approve sincerity better than an affectation of ignorance, which your Highness must know could not be real."

Isabella sighed.

" There, girl," she said—" there. To be sure I like sincerity."

" Where what is to be is an open secret," continued Fanchette—" and somebody's tastes so coincide with your Highness's ; I—I thought your Highness would be gratified to know."

Isabella laughed, and then sighed again, as she released her hold, with a little conciliatory pat, and reseated herself—a movement which gave Fanchette an opportunity furtively to examine her prize.

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"I daresay I am," said the Infanta. "It is gratifying, at least——" she stopped.

"It is gratifying, at least," said the maid, who had resumed her duties, "to learn, as your Highness was about to remark, that philosophy can so concern itself with natural beauties. But indeed there are other proofs that a fine complexion is not the only thing honoured in Vienna."

"I suppose I ought not to ask you what you mean, Fanchette."

"Mademoiselle has not heard of the Chevalier Tiretta?"

"No."

"Such a voice, your Highness, and such a man! He is a gift from the archduke to his Excellency, and has been ravishing the Courts of Parma with his music these days past. They say——"

"Well?"

"I hardly like to repeat."

"Do not, then."

"That somebody in love has made this nightingale his avant-coureur to overture his passion."

"Do they say, girl? I think, indeed, your idle fancy is the only gossip."

Fanchette's head was seen in the mirror to nod itself, and her strait lips to smile.

"It is not fancy, at least," she said, "but simple reason, your Highness, to deduce from this singer that philosophy may have its sentimental side. Else it would not choose for its close intimacy—as is

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whispered to be the case—so picturesque a comrade, or, having chosen, select him for a mission so romantic.”

Isabella rose. There was a little stately chill in her young aspect.

“That is quite enough,” she said. “I do not wish to listen to any more of this nonsense, or to seem to encourage you to repeat it. Give me my fan and mouchoir, please. It is time for me to descend.”

At the door a couple of powdered *valets-de-chambre* greeted the young lady, low-bowing, and, candle in hand, preceded her down the broad stairway to the *salle-d'audience*. It was a fine chamber, bemirrored, bemarkbled, with a pillared balcony through which the soft night air flowed in. Penury or plenty, there was nothing here, no seat, no ornament, no picture, between the painted ceiling and the rich, deep carpet, but declared itself in terms of gilt and splendour a thing of luxury. The room was brilliantly lighted by a multitude of wax candles set in girandoles, and as Isabella, announced by a gentleman usher, entered it, each separate flame bowed to her as to the goddess for whom they had all been waiting.

There were only three people present—the *gouvernante*, in an elaborate toilette and stupendous hoop ; M. du Tillot, short, complacent, in a blaze of silk and embroidery ; and a second gentleman, a stranger, somewhat soberly dressed, who stood in the back-

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ground, bowing low, so that his face showed fore-shortened. The Secretary of State came forward, beaming, ingratiatory, tripping on his fat little pumps. He bowed elaborately over the hand which Isabella gave him, and kissed it as if he were negotiating an oyster.

"I greet your Highness," he said, "on behalf of the Court, myself, and, above all, his Excellency, your father, who, I rejoice to inform you, is very well."

"And my maman, monseigneur?" asked Isabella, her eyes full and shining.

"She writes in the best of spirits," said du Tillot: "like one who finds in the promised fruition of her hopes a glad new lease of life." He was a kind old man. The formality achieved, he pressed the little palm, and, looking at the lowered lids, "we will do our best, will we not, my child," he said, "to justify maman in her convalescence?"

"I want maman to be well above all things in the world," said Isabella simply; and then the *gouvernante* struck in in her high throaty voice:

"Eh bien! It is very well to wish for others what our self-will is inclined to deny them."

It seemed unnecessary, but madam had that way of grudging its perfect bloom to harmony, to which certain minds, having a mistaken sense of humour, are wont, seemingly irresistibly, to be moved. She could not forego her grumble, even where policy counselled silence. She would deliberately invite

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offence, and then, resenting being treated as offensive, would study, though she had to bide her time for it, to make herself as unendurable as possible.

“Am I self-willed?” asked Isabella, appealing to the minister. But, though she spoke plaintively, there was a spark of ominous colour in her cheek.

“You are your mother’s true daughter,” answered du Tillot, with a glance of annoyance at the marquise. “You will yield to loving reason what you would ever refuse to dictation. But that is neither here nor there in the light of my present business, which is to introduce to your Highness’s good favour—” he wheeled, with an expressive gesture—“the person of the Chevalier Tiretta, a gentleman of the Viennese Court, and as admirable a musician and improvisatore as he is a soldier of tried merit.”

Isabella was conscious of a little thrill and shock, as she turned to the hitherto unregarded stranger. Then a flush mantled her face from chin to brow, and she dropped a curtsy quite repellent in its frigidity. She knew him at once; how could she fail to? or to associate this and that in the sudden leap of recognition? A sense of indignation, of recoil as from an astounding revelation, were the predominant emotions in her mind. Then Fanchette’s gossip, and the one conclusion to be drawn from it!—she hardly heard the purring phrases of the Secretary of State, as he improved upon his opening:

“His Excellency, your father, deploring his

prolonged absence from his child, sends her this voice to interpret sweetly for him the love his heart is withheld from expressing. He entreats her to share with him a treasure his affection will not permit him to monopolise, and to preserve and honour it against his soon return."

Isabella's cheek, as if to vindicate Fanchette's claim, had gone from red to white. She turned her back on the stranger.

"I needed no such proof of my papa's love," she said to du Tillot; "or of any instrument, however accommodating, to interpret it to me. But you will assure him from me, monsieur, that his daughter will not fail to give honour where honour is due."

"Heyday!" cried the marquise—she had been effervescing where she sat, her eyes glassy, and a mirthless smile on her fat old lips. "This is not self-will, to be sure! This is a graceful yielding to reason, and a fine reception of his Excellency's honoured protégé. What do you mean, child, abusing your father's consideration and insulting his deputy in this fashion?"

All this, to be sure, was grievously embarrassing to the stranger, who had to stand during this dispute, feeling very much like an actor who has come forward to make an unwelcome explanation and holds his ground biding an abatement in the storm of hisses and orange peel which greets him. His mouth twitched, it is true, and there was a ghost

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of a twinkle in his mournful eyes ; otherwise his aspect was one of profound wonder and deprecation. But the Gonzalès, wrought up now to the full fury of her resentment, would by no means consent to forego, in the face of this wounded appeal, the moral triumph it afforded her. She got to her feet, fuming and ejaculating, and, while M. du Tillot arched his brows in lost amazement over the scene, hurried across to the chevalier, and, seizing his two hands in hers, panted out a flurry of apology, explanation, protest :—

“ No wonder you look surprised, monsieur ; no wonder you look hurt. This reception of his Excellency’s gift, of an honoured subject and comrade moreover of one whose least recommendation should entitle its bearer to our utmost attention and consideration—it is unaccountable, it is infamous, it reflects upon my careful tuition in a way which is humiliating to a degree. I beg you to attribute to nothing but a spoilt caprice this seeming abuse of a favour, which others, less *self-willed*, can appreciate at its worth ; to forget a slight——”

But here du Tillot, grim and peremptory, thought fit to interfere.

“ The chevalier,” said he, “ is, I am sure, more taken aback over this tirade than over any imaginary provocation to it. Her Highness said nothing to which exception could be taken by a reasonable mind. And as to the fine instrument—if monsieur

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will forgive me the figure of speech—she has as yet heard its virtues only trumpeted by others.”

He turned to Isabella, with a smile. The girl was quite white.

“ I did not mean to imply such offence,” she said. “ If my manner suggested a ‘ spoilt caprice,’ monsieur will know how to interpret it at its true value.”

She would say no more. She seated herself on a sofa, and set to fanning her face, as if its aspect were not already chill enough.

Du Tillot, puzzled by the equivocalness of her words, met the situation, nevertheless, with diplomatic tact. This romantic essay—if, indeed, it were one, as privately surmised—had not opened propitiously. Possibly the girl’s prejudice against her royal suitor was more deep-seated than they supposed. Yet how could *she* have guessed this troubadour’s presumptive mission? It was merely conjecture with the best of them. It would seem that only to be accredited from Vienna was offence enough in her eyes. At the same time he was furiously angered with the marquise over her outburst. What did the old fool, manœuvring to bring about this situation, and then spoiling it by belittling her charge in the eyes of Austria’s representative? He could have slapped her gross old arms, viciously, and with joy.

But he did nothing so impolitic. On the contrary, he tripped over to the cross old lady, and bantered

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her charmingly and playfully on her temper. The ardour of her spirit, he said, bespoke the youth which was perennially reluctant in her to quit the temple of its triumphs and conquests. But was not the generosity of sentiment, characteristic of that vernal condition, a little apt sometimes to wax unnecessarily hot in defence of its enthusiasms? There had been no slight intended here, he would answer for it, either to an exquisite gift or to her fine appreciation of it.

“Enthusiasms!” cried madam—but she was already mollified. “I assert nothing, for my part, but an unquestioning faith in the perfection of those accents which the tenderest regard has chosen to be its interpreter.”

“And which shall answer to your faith, I give my word,” said du Tillot.

Madam laughed high.

“After such assurance,” she said, “the chevalier has no choice but to submit his credentials. What shall it be, monsieur—love, friendship, philosophy? Say philosophy as applied to love.”

The stranger’s mandolin was lying on the harpsichord. He lifted it, with the quietest air of acquiescence, and caressing it in his arms, as if it had been a dear infant, touched out a disconnected note or two. Thence his fingers seemed to wander haphazard over the strings, seeking, while his abstracted eyes pursued their theme, the point where thought and setting should blend into one

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alliance, melodious and expressive. And presently the words came :

“ Apply philosophy to love, as salve is applied to a wound : and, lo ! as the wound is healed, so is the salve infected with its virus. If love, then, shall live, philosophy must die.”

So ran his theme, followed, with an infinite elaboration of word and note, to the little rippling cadenza on which it ended. It was very finished, very clever ; but with scarce a suggestion of real feeling behind it. Only the soft flexibility of the voice seemed to suggest itself a medium for nobler inspirations. It was very sweet in quality and very moving.

The marquise applauded the improvisation sky-high. “ What do you think now, little grudger ? ” she said, with a triumphant look at Isabella. “ Has not monsieur justified in himself his Highness’s gift ? It is for you, in turn, to propose the theme.”

“ I think,” responded the young lady, coldly, but with a faint rose of colour on her cheek, “ that love is a vulgar complaint and philosophy a rare one. I would let love, for my part, be the one to die, since he is the easier spared. Monsieur, perhaps, will sing us his requiem.”

Monsieur bowed low, a smile in his eyes, while madam, shooting a significant glance at du Tillot, set to fanning herself scornfully.

Once again the fingers fluttered lightly on the strings, and once again gradually disentangled from

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them, as it were a flowering spray from a thicket. a tender Lydian measure :

“ Love died of Isabel, and lay at rest,
Slain by the cold sweet arrows from her breast.
And, as he quiet slept, came Isabel
To view the cruel work she'd done so well ;
When, as is wont to hap, the wound she'd given
Broke forth anew, denouncing her to heaven.
For whom Death answered, dropping from above :
' Now is my reign established, quit of Love !
For my sake did you do this thing ? ' Then she :
' Ah, no ! But that I loved Philosophy.'
So, hardly had she spoke when, with a spring,
Love rose, and, laughing joyously, took wing.”

Madam, at the finish, broke into rapturous applause : “ Il fait tourner la chance ! ” she cried, with a rocking laugh. “ Il fait tourner la chance. O, that was very well indeed, monsieur ! You have the true genius for improvisation.”

But du Tillot, secretly watchful, shook his head just perceptibly.

“ I hope not too daring,” he thought, noticing the girl's face.

Isabella neither applauded nor dissented. A liberty, her aspect might have denoted, was best rebuked by contemptuous silence. Only when presently the marquise called the stranger to her side, she rose, as if in quick avoidance of his neighbourhood, and addressed herself exclusively for the rest of the evening to the Secretary of State.

But when the gentlemen were gone—one of them in the stinging consciousness of an obeisance un-

acknowledged—she turned upon the *gouvernante* with real anger in her eyes :

“ Did you not recognise him, madame ? ”

The old lady actually quailed before the inquisition of that look.

“ What if I did ? ” she said sullenly : “ What then ? ”

“ And draw the only conclusion that one can draw from his presence here ? ”

“ You are a fool and a prude,” cried the marquise, bursting out suddenly between fury and trepidation. “ My God, I think I have never known such another. All this to-do about a piece of pleasantry that was nothing in itself, and should count for less than nothing in the context of that sincere and noble nature which condescends to honour you with its regard. The selection by such a prince of an instrument to sing his devotion in your ears should be enough to convince you of the high character of his deputy. But whether you like the chevalier or not, and whatever your sense of filial duty, you have got to endure him, that is all—aye, and to listen to him, too.”

“ It will not be your fault, at least, madame,” said Isabella, “ if my ears by this time are not inured to offence,” and, very pale, with her head high, she walked out of the room.

CHAPTER VI

NON DOLCE FAR NIENTE

AND so we reach a situation which, having no least authority to complicate itself, must suffice us in its simplicity to the end. It is a situation as old as the human drama ; it has formed the groundwork for a thousand tales of passion and infidelity, more fierce, more involved than this that I relate ; it embraces for its essentials but three characters, the lady, and the diffident lover, and the false friend. Yet, although our version may not rank in poignancy with the tragedy of the Rimini, or in homeliness with the courtship of Miles Standish, it can claim for its main details that virtue of truth which ennobles even little calamities above the finest ecstasies of the imagination.

It is into a brief idyll of love and summer, then, that we are now to penetrate. Would it might begin and end there in the green gardens—to flow, in Tennyson's words :

“ . . . sweetly on and on,
Calming itself to the long-wished-for end,
Full to the banks, close on the promised good.”

But, alas ! though the spirit of romance plead to us, soft as his loveliest temptress to St. Anthony,

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our historical conscience must remain cold and deaf to its entreaties. As things happened, so must they be recorded.

The lady, and the lover, and the false friend. It is such a simple tale, and so haunted by precedent, that the least sophisticated reader, given these premises, could surely write it for himself. Only remember that no such friend was ever false by design. Nor was this one. He began by detesting his task, not from conscientious motives, but because he went into it branded by the wounding stigma of her who was its object. He knew in what comparative light she would regard his advocacy; and he knew that in his own conscious acceptance of that estimate was foretold the failure of his mission. What value were to be attached to the praises of such a man?—so would run her thoughts. To be belauded by him were to be implied despicable. So he would only end by confirming the very complaint he was sent to alleviate—and serve those right who had commissioned him. It would do them no harm to learn that to strain devotion too far were to have it snap and recoil on themselves. At this beginning of things he really believed that he hated the young Infanta—a sentiment certainly little conducive to the successful accomplishment of his business.

And it did nothing to put him on better terms with himself to realise with what contemptuous confidence he was delegated to this task. Joseph or Philip—it was all the same moral of princely omnipotence.

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He was with both of them just the insensate instrument, to be played upon, to evoke certain emotions at command, and then to be dispensed with as a mere mechanical agent that had served its purpose. That he might prove a self-conscious agent, possessing feelings and passions of his own, never seemed to occur to either of them as remotely conceivable. He was just turned loose into the green pastures of Colorno, as a lowly steer might be entrusted to the company of a pedigree heifer—entrusted to excite her interest, that is to say, in the royal bull which was to succeed him by and by.

He laughed, putting that image to himself; yet really it was a not exaggerated one. Only, apart from the pledges of so-called friendship, he was doubtful of his own capacity to excite. If the lady started with a prejudice, he started with a grudge, and the two between them seemed inimical to a right sentimental understanding. Supposing panegyric were merely to react through him upon its subject? In that case the logical course would be to represent Joseph as undesirable. Yet he hardly dared to risk such a chance. No, he would be faithful to his mission, and, if that failed—well, *he* had not been the one to initiate the business of the green intaglio. They must fight it out among themselves.

And in the meanwhile he would act according to his lights. For some days after his installation at the palace he was scrupulous in obliterating himself so far as Isabella was concerned. He saw the

marquise privately, and took pains to convince her, against her more truculent judgment, that his policy for the moment lay in self-effacement. Time and opportunity, he said, would best decide the manner of his next approach. He brought her to agree with him, the more easily as that old intriguing bosom could yet find, in the attentions of a personable male creature, the shadow of an ancient thrill. She admired his bright volubility—for, the chevalier's tongue once loosened, he gave it full exercise—she admired his romantic looks and more romantic songs. They were all for her for this time being ; and for her the frank confidence which confessed, confirming her suspicions, the true purpose of his mission. They were conspirators together, very humorous and understanding.

In truth, the man did not know how to begin. That unforeseen antipathy seemed to blight his inspiration, and he was glad of the respite. He spent much of his time, while so temporising, in wandering about the spacious grounds. They were fair in the Italian style, with formal walks, and fountains, and colonnades of marble ; better still, with remoter green recesses where one might lose oneself amidst flowering thickets, set here and there with sunk gardens and lily-ponds. One morning, when so strolling, he came plump, turning a leafy corner, upon Madame Gonzalès and her young charges. Those were three in all, the two younger, Ferdinand and Louise, sharing, pretty equally between them

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some fifteen years. These youngsters drove in a little chaise, with a pretty white goat to draw it, and Isabelita walked smiling at the head. Tiretta saw the smile fade and the slender figure stiffen in the moment of his appearance. He bit his lip, as he stopped to greet the cavalcade with a bow.

"Ah, monsieur!" cried the marquise, with a quick wrathful glance at the young lady; "this is well encountered. We are all hot and tired, and would welcome someone who would amuse us."

They had halted near a rustic bench, and thereon the old lady seated herself, fanning her moist face fretfully.

"Charmed," said Tiretta. "What shall I do—turn Catherine-wheels down the alley, or run after my own tail, like a puppy?"

The little eight-year-old boy laughed gleefully. "Is that your tail, monsieur?" he said, stretching out to touch the chevalier's sword.

"Like the scorpion's, I fain would think, young sir," said Tiretta. "It hath a sting in it for those who would approach it rashly."

The boy, pulling at the reins, looked up with large indolent eyes. "Woa, Belletto! Stand still, little hog! Are you a soldier, monsieur?"

"I am what they call a soldier of fortune, sir. I fight, when I fight, to vindicate and extol her name, as the Knight of la Mancha fought for his Dulcinea. You have heard of him?"

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“ Haven’t I, just ! But I would rather, for my part, fight for my country.”

Isabelita’s little hand, for all the feigned abstraction of Isabelita’s eyes and thoughts, touched the child’s shoulder approvingly. He looked round at her. “ Wouldn’t *you*, Lita ? ” he said.

“ What, dear ? ” she answered, stooping to him.

“ Wouldn’t you rather fight for your country than for Mademoiselle Fortune ? ”

“ Of course, Ferdy. How can you ask such a question ? ”

“ There was never a knight in the world more worthy than this Quixote to wear his spurs,” said Tiretta.

She was impelled to answer him against her will :

“ There was never one who despised fortune more, or owed so little to her.”

“ I do not despise her,” said Tiretta quietly. “ If I did, I could not serve her as disinterestedly as this don served his peerless one. But a man must have his ideal to inspire him, though it be no better than a purse of fairy gold, and though it leave him in the end as poor as he began.”

“ My God, what nonsense you all talk ! ” cried the marquise crossly ; “ and monsieur is the most wilful of the lot. He is a brave soldier, and he has fought for Spain.”

“ Is Spain your country ? ” asked Ferdinand.

“ I fight for fortune—always for fortune, I tell you,” said Tiretta, with an obstinate smile.

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The little boy touched his sword again.

“ With this, monsieur ? Has it killed many people ? ”

The Gonzalès laughed loudly.

“ It has killed one person,” said Tiretta, “ whose blood, mademoiselle your sister will likely tell you, has dishonoured it for ever.”

“ Whose ? ” said the child eagerly. “ Tell me, monsieur.”

Tiretta drew out the blade—an elastic strip of steel, long toughened by use—and ran his finger along it.

“ It belonged,” he said, “ to an old friend of mine. I thought him one of the noblest of men ; but since, like myself, he was a mere soldier of fortune, that may be nothing but my prejudice. He had fought successfully in a number of causes ; but in the cause of self-interest he failed. He had many and grave faults—a persistent craze for gambling ; an arrogant temper ; a furious hatred of the people. To hear him fulminate, one would have thought he ranked them with the grass—ready, on the least provocation, to mow them down by the acre. But he played straight, while others robbed him ; out of his lean purse he pensioned a dishonest rogue grown crippled in his service ; his temper never impaired his perfect honour. And, as to his hatred of the people—why here, after all, was the moral of it. He met his death rescuing a drunken old woman, horrible, hideous, debased, from the hands of a party of

miscreants. But she was a woman, you understand. That was in Castille ; and there I stood by his bedside, and received this weapon from his hands as a last bequest. I have tried to honour it since, but never to such honour as when, in piercing that scoundrel heart, it was used by him nobly to falsify the asserted principles of a lifetime. At least, so, being another soldier of fortune, I regard its distinction."

He slipped the blade back into its scabbard, while the children, only half understanding him, regarded the act in silent curiosity.

"But *am* I amusing you?" he cried, with a laugh, to the marquise. "As a soldier of fortune, I could bring many such pretty tales out of my pack."

"Pooh!" said the old lady impatiently. "Why do you take this perverse pleasure in misrepresenting yourself? We know, monsieur, what we know; and that does not conceive the case of a certain exalted mind stooping to intimacy with a worthless adventurer. There are patrons whose simple favour speaks all that is needed for the high merit of those they distinguish by it."

"I am not denying it, God forbid, madam," cried Tiretta. "I would not so dishonour his Highness's noble character as to pretend it could find pleasure in base friendships. As a prince, he is without littleness; as a man, his instincts always lead him towards the highest."

"It is so, without question," said the marquise, nodding her head delightedly.

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“ Nevertheless,” said Tiretta, “ I hold by my title. It hath the warrant of the noblest gentleman ever born of imagination or fact. And so I do not use it in irony or self-depreciation, but as a title to be defended like a king’s.”

“ Eh bien ! ” said madam indulgently ; “ let it remain, then, as a question of terms. Be to yourself what you will ; to us you shall be the knight-errant. Eh, Isabelita ? ”

“ Pray do not ask me, madam,” responded the girl coldly. “ I am not a judge of what constitutes a knight-errant.”

She quite foresaw the angry protest her tone would evoke ; and yet she would affect no other. Everything this man said offended her. She saw only design and insincerity behind it. This mission he was engaged to fulfil must always be paramount in his mind, and her consciousness of that preoccupation made her suspicious of his every sentiment. She thought it a pity that one so recommended by his looks and soldierly reputation should condescend to lend himself to such finical, rather contemptible practices. But no doubt he had been demoralised by flattery. There was nothing in the world like a fine voice to convert a man into an insufferable coxcomb. The insolence of the light laugh with which he received her snub spoke a whole volume for his impregnable self-complacency. It brought a flush to her cheeks.

But the laugh had in reality spoken no more than

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a tickle of that humour which accepts its own failures whimsically.

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried the marquise. "You were ready enough with your definitions when you wanted to contradict monsieur. But one can no more produce reason from temper than grapes from a thistle or music from that tree."

"Cannot one?" said Tiretta, hastily interposing with a droll look. "Ah, but I do not feel so sure!"

There was a knot of frayed bullion hanging from his sword hilt, and, picking delicately, he unwound from it a single strand of gold wire a yard or so in length. This, after testing, he carried to a branch that overhung the walk, and, fitting it taut within a natural bow made by the wood, contrived a tonic resonant string, which, daintily touched, answered to his manipulation like that of a fairy guitar.

"Now," he said, his head bent to the string and his fingers lightly caressing it? "shall we see if the little tree will sing to us?"

"Yes, yes!" cried the children breathlessly.

"You must be very quiet," he said. "It will speak, if it speaks at all, so soft and shy that a sound would frighten it."

They sat as dumb as mice—as dumb as the hot motionless air about them. And presently his fingers moved—the merest phantom of music; and in the low phantom of a voice he took up their tale:

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“ What music in the little tree ?
The wind, the bird, the humming-bee.
They yield their secrets up, and sing
With tirra-lirra down my string.
The cricket with his shrilling call,
The little cheeping mouse and all,
They skip and dance like anything
As ‘ tirra-lirra ’ sounds my string.
Then ‘ Tap ! ’ the hidden wood-chuck. Hark
His tiny baton on the bark !
And nightingale stands up to sing
His tirra-lirra down my string.”

The wire snapped, and the singer threw up his arms with a resigning laugh.

“ More, more ! ” cried the children delightedly ; and the *gouvernante* applauded with all her might : “ Brava, bravissima ! It was the most perfect, the most wonderful thing ! ”

It was wonderful really. This man had the inexplicable gift. He could have produced music out of a key, or a saucepan-lid, or an old shoe, like Paganini or some other. He seemed to think in it, and the appropriate words fitted themselves rhythmically to the sounds. It was all done without the least appearance of effort ; and there was the woodpecker’s tap and the nightingale’s trill unmistakable in their context. Of course the verse given is an adaptation, and I daresay a bad one, of the original ; but it supplies the sense.

Isabella was moved, as she could hardly fail to be. Certainly his voice was a beautiful one—she would grant him that. He had the right to be conceited

about it—if he was conceited. But she felt all at once a doubt. He had sung so prettily and naturally, and solely for the children's sake. Perhaps, after all, what she had thought the confident effrontery of his manner betokened no more than the conscious independence of a free spirit. He would not be overruled, she remembered, about his self-imposed title. That hardly looked like conceit. If she could only believe a little in his personal genuineness, she might excuse him more. It was something in his favour, at least, that he had undertaken a task so unwelcome as this must be from considerations of pure friendship. Yet had he done so? He was a soldier of fortune—he himself had declared it—and the lure he followed must always and necessarily be a golden one.

And straight, on the thought, the unwarranted meanness of the accusation so recoiled upon herself as to make her seem, in its silent utterance, the contemptible one. That momentary revulsion of feeling wrought its mood, penitent and characteristic. It was always this affectionate child's instinct to propitiate where she thought she had hurt; and, if only in thought, thought none the less must plead for absolution.

The little Louise, leaning from her place, had caught the chevalier's arm in both her own and was nestling her plump cheek against it. That was pretty and significant. It showed he was a man whom children naturally trusted and liked.

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“ Look,” said the little maid ; “ that is Lita’s own lily-pond down there. Lita loves lilies.”

He felt the inopportuneness of the allusion, and his lips twitched a trifle as he responded :

“ Do you know what water-lilies are, ragazzina ? No ? They are the little washing basins of the nixies.”

“ They do not hold water, monsieur.”

“ Ah ! we who live on land wash in water, you see ; but those who live in the water wash in sunshine. If you look very carefully, you will see they are all full of it.”

A sweet voice spoke to him :

“ I am very proud of my pond, monsieur.”

He acknowledged the concession with a little grave inclination of the head : “ You have reason to be, Madonna ”—and turned and addressed himself to the child again.

CHAPTER VII

LOVE-IN-A-MIST

THE next day opened wild and wet. In the night a west wind had driven in from the sea, and drawn a rushing curtain over the rainbow summer of the gardens. Isabella, for no reason that she could define, felt strangely restless and uneasy. She was not wont to weather moods, or to feel impatience over enforced confinements to her rooms. Now, quite inexplicably, that prospect seemed insufferable ; something in her cried out for space and freedom ; the call of the wind and the rain reached to her for the first time, as though an unsuspected door in her heart had suddenly blown open. As sin or fever dreams of water, eternally of a cool and cleansing stream, so her soul turned with longing to the cold purification of the storm. And presently, unable to resist, she put on cloak and hood, and slipped out undetected into the gardens.

The rain came in her face and blew it as pink as a flower ; the wind snatched at her hair, and caught and played with a fluttering wisp of it. As she went on, a spirit of exhilaration rose to possess her, quite alone and at liberty as she was. State and observance seemed unreal things ; there was not a

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soul abroad to remind her of them ; she and nature were in one confidence together, as if, like old companions long mistily estranged, they were as mistily reunited.

Involuntarily, it seemed, her steps took her towards the spot associated with an incident of yesterday. There was a woven arbour near by the lily-pond, and her thoughts settled there, as in a hermitage sweet for meditation. She would like to sit and watch the drops plash in the water ; she pictured the lilies drunk to satiety on the element they loved, and expanding their gorged cups till they could stretch no further ; she foretasted the wet solitude of it all as a refuge from strange unrecognised emotions, a little distressful yet a little sweet, which seemed suddenly to have overtaken her, flowing from some primeval source.

The flowering borders, as she passed them, were all gravel-splashed and sodden. She saw an early blossom that she loved, a little blue starry thing of the fennel tribe, and stopped to shake its heavy-hanging sprays free of water, and to pluck one and put it in her bosom. Then she went on.

As she neared the arbour an instant panic seized her. Some sound, more self-betraying than her own light footfall, had penetrated to her through the flapping shutters of the wind—a voice, a tuneful vibration. She stood transfixed, her thoughts poised on the prick of swift escape. And then she flushed a little and remembered herself. She was

the Infanta, mistress of her own actions and of her chosen retreat. Very resolute she stepped on, the trampling rain covering her approach, and paused once more, herself unseen, within close hearing of the sound.

It was the stranger, alone apparently within the arbour, and communing with himself through the medium most natural to him. For the first time she heard him, witless of any audience, delivering up his soul like an unconscious bird. She felt it like a revelation, while she stood spell-bound. There was no forced cleverness here, no artificial display, even of the sort that had won the children's hearts; it was just moving thought transmuted into music.

She hardly gathered the import of the words, nor desired to. It was enough that they blent themselves inevitably with the haunting melody his fingers drew from the strings, and spoke with it a language that was articulate only to the soul. The effect was no more nor less than a sensuous selection of sweet sounds, gathered, as they offered themselves, into a fragrant bouquet, whose scent, to speak in symbols, touched the deep tears of things.

Suddenly conscious of something warmer than a raindrop on her cheek, Isabella started and moved. The music ceased on the instant. She took her shamefaced courage in hand, and entered the arbour.

He rose from the bench on which he had been seated, looking as if he saw an apparition. She smiled at him a little faintly.

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" You did not know, monsieur, that this place was sacred to my meditations ? "

" I did not know, Madonna. What can I do to expiate such desecration ? "

" Not speak in mockery, at least."

" Ah ! Do I ? "

" Your eyes betray you, I think. I will be candid with you, monsieur. It is not the first time I have read them so. Is it that you regard your mission with so little seriousness ? " He was startled enough—on the point of prevaricating. " Will you not tell me the truth ? " she said sincerely.

His brows bent a little.

" Will you have it, Madonna ? " he answered in a moment. " See, I entered here, all unguessing of its holiness, to brood alone. The weather, I thought, secured me. But there are others, it seems, who feel its fascination no less. Will you not forgive the innocent sacrilege, and bid me go ? "

" Are we, then, so distasteful to you that you must leave us in order to brood alone—on your injuries, perhaps ? "

" I have injuries ; but I do not wish to speak of them."

" Monsieur, I stood a little while outside—I say it to my shame—listening to you. That is to confess ; and will you not reciprocate my candour ? *Please, monsieur.*"

The pretty entreaty quite disarmed him.

" I will speak the truth," he said. " Do you ask

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me if I take my mission seriously? My answer to that is that his Highness the Archduke might choose a finer advocate to sound his praises, but never one more earnest or convinced."

She looked down, drawing in the dust with the point of her little shoe.

"I have always heard of him as a very grave and virtuous prince," she murmured.

"Believe it true, I beg you," said Tiretta. "His ideals are the ideals of a conscientious ruler and a noble gentleman. He has wisdom beyond his years, but free of pedantry, most sweet and natural affections, a fine presence, and a will which, if strong, is neither arrogant nor obstinate."

She did not answer for a little; and then she looked up.

"Well, you have fulfilled your part," she said. "Was there need to make such a mystery about it?"

"There was so little, it seems," he answered, "that your Highness has guessed it unspoken."

"And yet, monsieur, is it the whole?"

"What more, Madonna?"

"Why, this paragon of a prince should surely need no panegyrist so to recommend him, unless, indeed, there were a conscious flaw somewhere in his perfection."

He looked down in his turn; then suddenly up again, and boldly.

"If high-born ladies," he said, "will masquerade

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as rustic wenches, wading for lilies, it is no sin to accept them as they appear."

She drew back quickly.

"I think you may go, monsieur," she said.

He bowed, and was leaving, when she stopped him.

"One moment. That sword of yours—so dedicated—a fine comment on your yesterday's sentiment! A woman is a woman, is she not, and therefore to be saved insult?"

The chevalier's handsome pale face seemed to go a thought whiter.

"It is not in the code," he said, "that princes may not bestow insults. Your Highness took full advantage of that prerogative in refusing the token." His eyes were suddenly burning; his lips set grim as judgment. "I have some reason, perhaps, to brood over my injuries," he said. "They have known no salve, your Highness will understand, since, for friendship's sake, I essayed a thankless task."

He was again turning to go, and again she delayed him.

"Monsieur, I entreat you. A friend, I know, may act for a friend against his better inclination, and only because he is a friend. I do not doubt the independence of your mind or the honour of your principles."

Tiretta bowed stiffly, but in silence.

"I ask you to forgive me," she said.

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It was so sweet and unexpected that for the moment he was quite taken back. Then his face flushed through all its even pallor.

"It is I who should be the petitioner," he said. "I am your Highness's sworn henchman from this hour."

She smiled, rather tremulously, and, turning, signified with a gesture that she would prefer to be the one to go.

"No, monsieur: the grove shall be sacred to its songster. I beg you to continue to consecrate it. As for me, I am frightened already over the scolding I shall get if madame detects me returning through the rain."

He ventured to delay her one moment:

"I am to be permitted to speak henceforth, as a true ambassador, what my heart dictates?"

"O, fie, monsieur!" she said; "to think that perfection could need any trumpeting!" And, with those smiling ambiguous words, she left him.

For some moments after she was gone Tiretta stood motionless, frowning into vacancy. Then, with a sigh, he stirred, and, perceiving in the act a little spray of some blue flower which had fallen from her bosom to the ground, stooped, and secured it, and held the thing wonderingly in his hand.

"Love-in-a-mist!" he whispered: "So in the strange North lands—my lands—they call it. Love-in-a-mist!"

CHAPTER VIII

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A COUPLE of communications, relating to the rather fantastic business in hand, were despatched about this date from Colorno, the one by Tiretta and the other by the *gouvernante*. The soldier wrote, *inter alia*, to his royal friend and patron :

“ You will recall your words, that in this *affaire*—one of policy, it is true, but still an *affaire*—you were determined to woo your own way—*c’est-à-dire*, the way of a prince, who cannot desire plums but he must have a lackey to put them into his mouth for him. Well, as your Highness’s lackey, I have the honour to inform your Highness that the plum forthcoming is a very blooming and delectable one, promising satisfaction on all the points specified, and indeed, I think, on others supernumerary. The question is merely if the plum, for her part, wishes to be devoured ; but, even so, there is always a sweet provocation in coyness. Rest assured, at least, that I have left nothing undone to commend to it the fine taste of the connoisseur for whose enjoyment it is distinguished in being selected. I put it so for the reason that, whether by way of intuition or tittle-tattle, my mission, as I soon discovered, was

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suspect. That made my task none the easier ; and none the easier the allaying of the prejudice which, as your Highness correctly surmised, *did* exist against yourself. There is no blinking the fact that the lady had learnt to associate the Count of Falckenstein of a certain occasion with the heir to the Austrian throne, and that the knowledge stood at first in the way of a perfect reconciliation between her impressions of fact and the laudatory image, even a little strained, which I was moved to draw of your Highness. But that impression, I flatter myself, and the true devotion which gives fervour to my poor art, is surely if slowly in process of readjusting itself ; and I look confidently to the near time when the complete conversion I anticipate shall see eye to eye with me in the regard of your Highness's true character, its essential greatness and nobility. In the meanwhile I pray that that state of grace may be quickly forthcoming, in order to my release from a task to which nothing but my sense of friendship (I say it with all deference) could reconcile me. Carpet-mongering is not to my taste, nor am I pleased to have my soul sit and grin like a monkey on a hurdy-gurdy, while I grind out the music to order. Improvisation to command is a pure paradox, is it not ? So that, to end, if your Highness is dissatisfied with my progress, I have only to suggest that I possess another instrument at least as familiar to my hand as the mandolin, and as ready to ring true in the service of Austria, and that

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your father the Emperor waits at this moment for recruits in Silesia."

This missive the young archduke received and pondered in his cabinet at Schönbrunn. He frowned over it a good deal ; it interested and yet irritated him. Truth to tell, this romantic venture of his had, in the multitudinous pressure of State affairs, got rather crowded out of his mind. Fervours and enthusiasms have a distressing way of dwindling, like toy balloons, when put aside after an exciting game, and of incontinently bursting when one seeks to re-inflate them. So this unphilosophical afflatus had come to appear just a little limp and puckered to Joseph now he was invited to resume it, and to threaten, if incautiously reblown, to explode into thin air. The private mission it had inspired appeared to him all at once an extravagance, and more calculated to cheapen than to vindicate the imperial virtues which were its theme. This affected humility was perhaps a bad precedent to set in view of future relations ; after all, he was answerable to no one but himself for his principles and actions ; and he was particularly annoyed in that connection to learn that his purpose had been more or less divined. Tiretta must have managed very badly to make such a thing possible. He trusted at least that the suspicion was limited to Colorno, since he had an idea that the Empress, were it to reach her ears, would strongly disapprove his action. On the whole, he regretted having embarked on a project which had

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grown, or was growing, distasteful to his better sense of fitness.

And yet—that vision ! The archduke was unphilosophically impressionable, as has been said, to feminine attractions, and fain, where women were concerned, to be admired for himself rather than his position. Perhaps, all considered, as things had progressed so far and so favourably, it would be folly to recall his advocate at the crucial moment. At the same time there was something in that advocate's tone which disturbed him. Under its veneer of homage he seemed to detect a shadow of mockery, a humorous independence of mind, an imperfect conception of the sacro-sanctity of the task imposed. Humour, if the "something" was due to that objectionable quality, was quite out of place in a matter so momentous. He would be relieved to be satisfactorily done with a man whom he had never really fathomed or understood.

He answered Tiretta, commending what he had accomplished, advising the nicest tact, and promising to recall him the moment, in the deputy's own opinion, his mission was fulfilled.

To the Duke of Parma Madame Gonzalès wrote as follows :

"Your daughter appears irreconcilable in the matter of the chevalier. There is so far so little cause for that apprehension once hinted at in correspondence by her august mother, that the difficulty is to make either the man or his mission endurable

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in the girl's eyes. I should doubt the policy of continuing M. le chevalier at Colorno, were it not that I cannot conceive of such an advocate failing in the long run to impress himself. But how often we know the divinely inspired preacher to end by creating between others the emotional ardour which he is incapable of feeling or attracting on his own account. Such, I trust, will result from this propagandism of sweet sounds, and to the most desirable effect. The man is very cunning, like a veritable troubadour, in singing the praises of his prince. There is no direct allusion, but the reference is unmistakable. At present, there is no denying, the seed has fallen on difficult ground ; but I have hopes. She listens, at least, and her comments decreasingly savour of coldness and irony. Yet, it would be to deceive ourselves to pretend that she is as yet more than a potential convert. Last night M. Tiretta, being entreated to our entertainment, and demanding, as is his wont, a text, I gave him the posy he wore in his bosom, a little spray of the blossom we call St. Catherine's flower. ' It is the blue flower of martyrdom,' I said ; and he answered, ' Then shall it inspire me to sing of one I know in Vienna who is willing to die for his faith.' And so he improvised most meltingly on that theme ; yet to barren effect so far as her Highness was concerned. I have seldom known her more chill and unresponsive to a sweet ending. Her face was like a stone. Eh, bien ! we must console ourselves with the thought that the

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uttermost resistance often betokens the near point of surrender."

Don Philip, as has been hinted, fathered his pretty daughter in a tendency to what Mirabeau called "*le don terrible de la familiarité*"; only what in her proceeded from an open and affectionate disposition, in him was accountable to sheer weakness of character. He was a vain, useless, good-natured man, whose foolishness, perhaps pathetically beautified in the case of his first-born, was to find its supreme expression in the person of Ferdinand the second child, in whom a vicious imbecility came to develop itself. But Philip himself was not vicious, save in the sense of the mischief that is wrought through idleness. He frittered away his time in small local excitements; he devoted the most of his mornings to the mysteries of the toilet; he played faro and enjoyed an occasional intrigue; he patronised the Mass, the opera, and the promenade, each in its due proportion; he now and then entertained, for his highest intellectual distraction, some traveller of distinction visiting Parma. As to money, he could never master its significance; as to business, he detested it. On both counts his ministers had a bad time of it with him, and his familiars, of whom he had several, a remarkably good one. The confusion in the exchequer was their opportunity, and they took full advantage of it. The duke was easily responsive to prayers for assistance, especially if they emanated from people

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“ d’un état peu remarquable.” He had the liking of the petty mind for impressing by his bounty those of such a far social inferiority that the full measure of his condescension could be felt between them. Amongst his closest intimates were the Messieurs la Roque and la Coque, two men of indifferent birth, who caused endless trouble in the matter of palace factions. The former was middle-aged, crafty, smooth-tongued and a flatterer ; the latter was a pert coxcomb and braggart, jealous and mischievous. He had a minor faculty for music, which his conceit magnified into genius ; could set mediocre verses of “ the right butterwoman’s rank to market ” order, to compositions as vulgarly primitive. One might find his like in a hundred popular balladmongers of to-day—men who have the gift to touch out emotional chords to clap-trap sentiments. He and Don Philip, whose measure he exactly fitted, wasted much time together producing and practising over a number of such little sticky effusions. They were sometimes moved to tears over their own lucubrations.

His Excellency was at his toilet, his two friends being present, when the marquise’s letter was brought in to him. Its delivery had to be delayed, pending the performance of an important rite. This was no less than the placing of the ducal wig in position on the ducal poll. M. Frisson, the *perruquier*, spotlessly aproned and with a comb stuck in the side-frizzle of his own bob-jerom, as a

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clerk sticks a pen behind his ear, received the august erection from an attendant who had just brought it in from the powdering-closet, and, delicately shaking and blowing on it, poised it a moment over the cropt scalp, with the air of an archbishop officiating at a coronation, before he deftly lowered it into place. It was an action of ineffable and unfaltering elegance, necessitating none but the most trifling of after-touches to complete the effect—a slight joining of the flats, so to speak, with a fragrant grease-stick, a whiff of powder, a just more perceptible distribution of the rouge on the cheek-bones. His fingers fluttered like butterflies tasting the honey of flowers ; he stood back finally to admire his own work ; a valet offered the duke a laced *mouchoir* heavily scented with tuberose ; and the ceremony was accomplished.

Don Philip, exhaling incense, proceeded leisurely, the attendants being dismissed, to read the *gouvernante's* communication. But first he put it from him with a nose of disgust.

“ Toilet-vinegar,” he said. “ The very ink reeks of it. What odds on the writer ? ”

“ Ten to one on the Gonzalès,” cried la Coque.

“ No takers,” said the duke, and, frowning, perused the thing at arm's length. Both men sat eyeing him, the one inquisitively, the other covertly, as he read the letter. He pished and anathema'd over it a good deal.

“ Twenty gold ducats to a lira that she asks her

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wages in it ! ” cried la Coque impulsively, as the duke made an end.

Philip sniggered. “ Taken,” he said, and tossed the letter across to the speaker.

La Coque made a wry face, and la Roque laughed softly and enjoyingly. He was a full-bodied man, with small drooping-lidded eyes and a small moist mouth.

“ Look before you leap, my little Charles, is a ver-y good proverb,” he said.

“ Bah ! good for cardsharpers,” retorted la Coque angrily.

“ Is that,” said the other smoothly, “ a specific innuendo or a generalisation ? ”

“ Supposing it is the former ? ” said la Coque insolently.

“ Then I repudiate it, with——”

“ With what ? ” demanded the coxcomb, rising.

“ With considerable indignation,” said la Roque. The duke made a laughing gesture.

“ Put down your crest, bully-boy ; and either read the letter or hand it me back.”

La Coque’s curiosity got the better of his temper, and, reseating himself, he obeyed, muttering below his breath. After a while he looked up, a very sneering expression on his pert combative face :

“ Her Highness shows a better judgment in music than some other people—that is all I have got to remark,” he said.

Don Philip prepared to amuse himself at his

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friend's expense. He was always ready to exact such payment for the familiarity he invited.

"Meaning," he said, with a just perceptible wink at the other intimate, "that she shows signs of succumbing after all to what, for our part, we found instantly irresistible."

"I neither meant that, nor detect here any such indication," was the glowering answer.

"You puzzle me, Charles," said the duke. "What *did* you mean then, may I ask?"

"I meant just what I said."

"Was ever such a cross enigma!" protested Philip to la Roque. "Here is our daughter, though in an unaccommodating mood, almost confessing herself at last a captive to the charm to which we all yielded at the first assault, and our friend will have us insensible by comparison. But I say we shall refuse to surrender to the Infanta that first place in appreciating M. Tiretta, in taking which we were all unanimous."

"Say with one exception," cried la Coque.

"One? Yourself, do you mean?"

"Certainly I do."

"What! You valued him at first at something lower than the rest of us?"

He knew very well the spiteful jealousy aroused in this rival bosom by the stranger's success, and delighted to prick and goad it.

La Coque ignored the exclamation. His patron's amiable purpose was perfectly plain to him.

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"I recognise, at this moment, M. Tiretta's art to be supreme," he said; "only I spell it, for my part, with a little a."

"*'Elles ne sont point bonnes,'* remarked the little low fox of the big high mulberries," murmured la Roque silkily.

The other darted a malignant glance at the speaker, but restrained himself. The duke, his nose wrinkled in a covert snigger, saw something in the insolent face which stiffened his own.

"An innuendo, Charles my friend?" he said. "Or are you meaning nothing but to belittle, after your way, M. Tiretta's gift?"

La Coque set his white teeth and nodded. He looked very much like a snapping terrier, whom it would be dangerous to handle incautiously.

"I do not belittle his gift," he said. "I spell it with a smaller letter than you, that is all."

"And with another significance—you imply something," said the duke, after frowning at him awhile. "What is it?"

"Perhaps my ears," replied la Coque, "are more sensitive than most to the subtle nuances of sound—to discords, disharmonies, so slight as to be imperceptible to less exquisite understandings. Perhaps her Highness is likewise constituted, so that within this Tiretta's mellifluous tones she is able to detect a something insidious, incorrect, which at once fascinates and repels her."

The duke did not answer; and presently he went on:

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" I was over at Colorno yesterday, and listening—not to him, you may be sure, but to one who observes things, and reports to me in confidence. See clever Hyacinth laugh to himself there, as if he guesses who that someone may be. This Hyacinth of ours, monsieur, has a marvellous gift for detecting smoke by its smell. Put his fat nose above a hearth, and ten to one he will instruct you presently where the fire burns. That is not the case with her Highness's governess, whom we may certainly commend for an old fool—saving her marquisate. She cannot see an inch beyond *her* nose in any direction ; and, when it comes to smoke, a man may blow it in her eyes in the name of flattery, and she will go blind rather than not accommodate him."

The duke, still staring with a perplexed expression and still silent, made a gesture to have the letter returned to him. Receiving it from la Coque's hands, he sat awhile studying and frowning over its opening sentences. Presently he looked up.

" I find no shadow of justification here," he said, " for such an innuendo."

" What innuendo, monsieur ? "

" That—that——" Don Philip rose suddenly to his feet, angry excitement in his eyes. " Are you daring to imply that this man is capable of such a mad abuse of his mission ? "

La Coque, his lids stretched, his chin hanging, looked the picture of stupefied innocence.

" Why, what can your Excellency mean ? " he said.

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"What did *you* mean, sir, by your art with a little a?"

"Nothing whatever, but that I do not rate the chevalier's capacity for music so high as you do."

"And that was all?"

"What else, in heaven's name?"

"You suggest that he blinds the marquise's eyes—to what?"

"O, to nothing in particular!"

"I insist upon knowing."

"Your Excellency overwhelms me. The mere thoughtless speculation of an idle mind. I put two and two together, not even considering that, according to some people, they do not necessarily make four."

"Come, explain yourself."

"Why, her Highness, by what we hear, is not, and very sensibly, moved by this man's meretricious Art—with a big A; and yet she is moved by his art."

"Well?"

"Well, monsieur?"

"You suggest a personal interest?"

"I suggest nothing—nothing whatever."

"Who was your informant?"

La Coque smiled, and shook his head.

The duke stood moody and preoccupied a moment. He had never in his heart approved this fantastic wooing by deputy; and had only abetted it for a diplomatic reason. It was still an open question with him and his duchess whether Maria Theresa

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destined Isabella for her son Joseph or for his younger brother Leopold, and, while that question hung in the balance, he had been willing to contribute what bias he could to the desired result. But supposing the girl's own perversity was actually promising to confound that issue by way of an intrigue with the chosen instrument to its success ! It was the day of slack moralities, and he had no hesitation in putting it so to himself, with little resentment but for the offence it implied against policy. And yet he loved his daughter in his way, and believed in her.

Believed in her, of course. She was utterly incapable of such a descent from all that constituted her his child and an Infanta of Spain. The thing was insanely preposterous—a vicious calumny. His expression cleared.

“ My good Charles,” he said ironically, “ your discretion is beyond praise ; only, evidence withheld is little better than false evidence. I should recommend you, for the future, to modify your spite against a better man, or it may get you into trouble.”

And, with these severe words, he left the room.

La Roque, following, paused an instant to whisper in the ear of the crestfallen coxcomb :

“ Mum, Charles—mum for your life ! Mamselle Fanchette was it ?—and in her Highness's own suite It would never do to reveal the source, would it ? But trust to my silence.”

La Coque, grinning savagely, struck his right hand softly into the palm of his left.

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“ A better man ? ” he muttered. “ We’ll see. Let him conquer where he will, then. Only, if signs are reported true, the victory will not be exactly as desired.”

But from that moment his jealousy of the rival singer developed into a positive hatred.

CHAPTER IX

THE DECOY

TIRETTA one morning was traversing an inner corridor of the palace on his way to the gardens, when, passing by a private door which gave egress from the Infanta's apartments, he almost ran against a young woman who at that moment issued from the opening. The lady effected a quite natural little scream and start, notwithstanding the fact that her eyes had been, but the instant before, watching through the door-slit the young gentleman's approach. He apologised becomingly, with many regrets for the alarm he had occasioned, and was proceeding on his way, when an exclamation from the girl arrested him. She had pressed a faultless little hand to that region in her dainty bodice under which her heart was presumably lodged, and, with her eyes half closed, appeared to be swaying slightly. He returned at once, and, with an aspect of real concern, offered his support.

Mademoiselle Becquet resisted, though faintly, the proffered assistance. There was, after all, something of the moral *hors-d'œuvre*, of the appetisingly unexpected, about this early capture of her slim waist by a shapely masculine arm. Finally she

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turned her head away, and, with a sigh, yielded herself to the embrace just as it appeared about to be withdrawn.

"You are better?" said Tiretta anxiously.

She gulped, still panting a little.

"It was the suddenness, monsieur. My heart is weak." (The wicked fibster! It was as tough as indiarubber, what there was of it.)

He expressed his compunction:

"And soft, I am sure," said he, "on behalf of a penitent sinner."

She smiled, in a recovered way.

"If you please, monsieur. But you need not take advantage of that absolution. A soft heart is the most fatal possession a girl can own to in this bad world. It were as foolish as to flaunt her jewels in the Ghetto."

Tiretta, with a laugh, released the slender waist.

"If you can stand alone," he said.

"O, yes!" she answered--and indeed there was no doubt she could.

He looked at her with a twinkling gravity.

"What is your name, child?"

She dipped him a demure little curtsy.

"Fanchette Becquet, at your service, monsieur. I am her Highness's confidential maid."

"She is prettily served, Fanchette."

"And handsomely, I am sure, monsieur. You see I return the compliment."

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He laughed again at her insolence—and checked himself suddenly.

“What on earth do you mean by that?”

“O!” she said innocently: “do you not love my mistress? Everybody loves her.”

He breathed again. There was safety in generalisations.

“If everybody loves her, then I suppose I must,” he said.

She clapped her pink hands.

“I will tell her. She will like to know that.”

He stared at the girl aghast; then nipped one of her slender wrists.

“If you dare! Are you off your head?”

“Perhaps, monsieur. You see you startled me so.”

“I don’t believe a word of it. I believe this was premeditated.”

“Yes, that is quite true.”

“It was?”

“I saw you coming before you saw me. I thought I should like to be her Highness’s proxy for your attentions. I would have let you kiss me, if you had offered.”

He released her, and stepped back.

“You are certainly mad,” he exclaimed.

She laughed: they were quite alone: then came close up to him.

“Would you like to practise again on me, monsieur—to test the softness of her heart by deputy? No?”

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"I am no thief," he said, as if stupefied. "Keep your jewels, for what I care."

"That is well," she answered mockingly, "since they are bespoken by another. Only I love an intrigue."

He commanded himself by a great effort ; assumed a chilling masterfulness, if he did not feel it.

"Listen to me," he said. "I cannot pretend to know on what false and vicious assumptions you are daring thus to impeach my honour. They are mistaken, whatever they are ; and let that suffice for you."

Fanchette set her lips tight, and nodded her head once or twice.

"O ! very well," she said. "There is no harm done. If I am mistaken I am mistaken, that is all."

He should have gone ; but he unwisely lingered.

"I believe," he said, "I ought to probe this to the bottom. Only gossip takes good care to be elusive."

"It cannot help itself, monsieur," said the girl. "It is all shaped upon signs and hints and glances—upon a mystic code which only the initiated can interpret."

"Then in that case you are not one of the initiated."

"I do my best, monsieur. Hey-day ! Well, from my own point of view, I am sorry for my mistress—especially as she looks, for her entertainment, to the company this afternoon of so chill a cavalier,"

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“ What do you mean ? ”

“ O ! nothing, but that we are going, she and I, to that old Aquaviva’s garden ; and without the she-dragon, who will be engaged over M. du Tillot.”

“ Her Highness expects me to accompany her ? ”

“ I did not say that. To think she could so commit herself ! But she sighs over the incompleteness of her dear orange-grove, which, says she, only needs its Orpheus to be the sweetest garden under heaven.”

“ It is melancholy to have to produce music to order, is it not, Fanchette ? ”

“ I think it is, monsieur.”

“ Well, I must respond, I suppose. It will only be a little while longer. It has this use, that you shall convince yourself by my behaviour of the wickedness of your innuendo.”

Convince herself as he convinced himself, no doubt. He told his conscience, as he walked away, that thus to go forward, steadfastly and dutifully, his eyes set to his mission, his ears deaf to the jeers and chuckles of scandal, was his only safe course. There was a story somewhere he had read of a prince whose way to a definite purpose lay up a stone-strewn hill, every pebble of which, when he came to the test, was clamant with an agonised or seductive voice entreating him to turn. And he did turn, and was changed into stone. Well, he must not be like that prince, that was all—an easy matter, it seemed. But the spirits of evil know their business better than man, or they would not provide so simple a lure for his

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ruin. It is the complicated trap which fails to beguile the confiding little mouse ; the deadly snare consists in no more than a fragment of bait and a wire spring.

Just to go steadily forward: yes, but this unexpected halt, with its startling revelation, had suddenly made of that plain road a rather formidable maze. Had he appeared, noticeably appeared, to be making too personal a matter of this business? Then how was a part so impassioned to be played in a spirit of aloofness? He swore he was loyal to his mission, loyal to his friend, that he was a man of honour, that he had never consciously wavered in his fidelity. Of course he had not. The devil knows better than to inoculate his victims perceptibly. It is a very favourite trick of his to encourage a man, who knows nothing whatever about moral architecture, to build over-heavily upon his moral strength. Tiretta was so confident in his, that he had never thought of questioning its capacity for supporting any test. He did not now ; he would not, Fanchette and all such mischievous gossips despite. He was just, he flattered himself, beginning to succeed in his romantic undertaking, and to feel a certain thrill in the near accomplishment of a task which had once promised to prove so distasteful. To withdraw now would certainly seem to give a colour to calumny. If only for the lady's sake, he must prosecute his purpose to its triumphant end.

What a chivalrous Tiretta, to be sure ; but

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indeed, he was not yet so conscious of his own state as to be guilty of lying to himself in the matter.

And in the meantime Mademoiselle Fanchette stood and looked after the retreating figure, and curtsied derisively to its back.

"You are a very pretty gentleman," she said : "but I know a prettier."

She had that other in her mind's eye. He was also a musician, but of a very different "tone," so to speak. He did not deal in the visionary stuff of dreams, but in the practical material of courtship—the sort of suitor a woman could understand. He set adorable words to intelligible music ; one was at no trouble with him to puzzle out sentiments which fitted themselves quite naturally into the love-traffic they recorded and provoked. And he too was handsome, but in a braver, bolder way, wooing, as a man should, by compulsion. She was in fact very much under the thrall of this cavalier, though still coquetting—for business' sake, as some French-women will—with the thought of capitulation.

And yet, with a curious perversity, she was jealous of the very quality she sneered at—acutely jealous of the mistress who might command, if she liked and as she liked, that dreamer of dreams. She did not understand M. Tiretta's mystical rhapsodies (she had often, herself unseen or unobserved, heard him improvise), or the fine subtlety of his mind, or the rareness of his gift ; she did not admire either his melancholy looks or his serene humour. But an

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uneasy suspicion as to the superior value of these qualifications, as compared with la Coque's showy and meretricious ones, haunted her. She felt them like supercilious reflections on her own vulgar taste, or on what they seemed to imply to be such ; and the thought, as with common natures, did not drive her to aspire, but to degrade. She had no wish, for herself or her lover, to rise to Tiretta's level ; she would have liked dearly to pull him down to theirs. Wherefore, in the prosecution of that amiable design, she had been quite ready to lend herself a subtle instrument to the ruin of that rival favourite. She would even, if provoked to it, have given her body to the task, as she had her soul. To hate and to seduce, to seduce because she hated, to risk loving because she had seduced—that was something her mental attitude. It was the passionist French view, and Fanchette was excessively French.

CHAPTER X

THE ORANGE GROVE

ALL the glowing air was steeped in incense. The mealy pollen of the orange blossoms, washed out by the rain of the preceding days, had dried and scattered its largesse, powdering with gold dust the purple whimples of the violets underneath. The smell of warm moistened grass rose to mix with and to freshen the languider perfume, whose excess had otherwise been cloying. No whisper breathed, no blade stirred in all the lovely grove. It was like a painted picture, each leaf of it, each waxen blossom, each incandescent globe of fruit drawn clear and motionless against its background of vivid blue ; and so stilly luminous throughout, that its shadows were but tempered light, embroidered, like rich velvet, with spangles of brighter emerald ; while the very prismatic sparkles with which the air was dusted seemed themselves to float asleep.

An hour ago a nightingale had sung, sweet as a little bell-glass ; since when this hush had fallen on the grove, sunk in warm drowsiness within its encircling green—a quiet so profound, one might have fancied one could distinguish the soft rustle of

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the cloud-skirts, as now and then they trailed across the sky.

A single blossom dropped, and the whole illusion scattered, like a mirrored image in a pool into which an acorn has fallen.

On the instant there came into this voiceless paradise the figures of a man and a stunted boy. The man carried a lute or mandolin slung over his shoulder ; the boy, large-headed and large-hatted like a gnome, followed importantly in the other's footsteps.

" It is the enchanted garden of Hesperus," said Tiretta, pausing on the threshold. He lowered his voice instinctively, as if he had broken unexpectedly into some woodland shrine of the gods ; then went a soft step or two and paused again.

" It is a very good plantation," said Bissy, tolerant and superior. " We have established it against some odds, signore, I can tell you."

" What odds ? " He looked at the imp vacantly, his thoughts elsewhere.

" Wind and snow," said Bissy. " The trees have to be protected and fed. Though they are grafted on sound lemon stocks, they are capricious at first, like infants put to a wet-nurse, and require a deal of coaxing. When lusty, they become strong feeders, as Mamselle Fanchette will tell you."

Tiretta caught the name.

" Who will tell me ? "

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"Fanchette. She is her Excellency's lady. She likes to hear that these trees drink blood. They will supply right wedding tokens for the brides of brave men, she says."

The old florist, busy and preoccupied, had not recognised the stranger when the latter had ridden over from Colorno to visit his gardens ; but Bissy had at once, and had offered to escort the gentleman whither he would.

"It is down there, through the juniper thicket," he said, pointing suddenly, with an air of shrewd confidence, "that one reaches the margin of the backwater where you first came upon her Excellency wading. Holy mother, what a state the old lady was in ! It looked at first as if she would have liked to drink *your* blood, signore. And then all at once she changed."

Tiretta took one step and nipped the elf by his ear.

"Ow—ow !" wailed Bissy ; completely flabbergasted.

The chevalier looked formidable.

"Your tongue is too long, whelp. Stand still a moment while I clip it for you."

"No, signore, don't !"

"I think I have no choice."

"For the love of the saints, signore. Ow—ow ! I will tell you something. It is ill to hurt one who has tried to do you a service."

"What service ?"

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“The ring, signore, that you threw away in a pet. I hunted for it, I did, when the water sank low in the creek ; but I could not find it.”

“You had no thought of me in the matter, you egg. You wanted it for yourself.”

He seemed to warm from counterfeit to genuine anger as he spoke. He wrung the boy's ear, so that the poor mannikin howled again.

“I've a mind to pull it off for you. What the devil do you mean, daring to criticise the actions of your betters ! ”

Suddenly conscious, in the midst of his fume, of its absurdity, he released his prisoner and stepped back. Poor Bissy, holding both hands to his smarting headpiece, stood wriggling and sniffing noisily.

“Stop that ! ” commanded the chevalier ; “or I shall have a double reason for gagging you.”

He could not tell himself what had provoked him to the assault. The nature of a particularly unpalatable reminder might have been responsible for it. No self-respect likes to have recalled to it the processes of past humiliations, even though it directly owes to them its present position. Help a nerveless subject to decision, help a diffident lover to his mistress, but never thereafter imply to either of them that he was once other than the masterful hero your assistance made him.

Not that Bissy had been of much assistance to our hero on a certain occasion. Only things had

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altered since then ; the old atmosphere of bitterness had sweetened to a strange new flavour.

Seeing the boy, with swollen lids and puckered face, trying to repress his sobs, remorse gripped Tiretta. That passion was always his besetting weakness. It urged him to reparations which were even more ill-advised than the hasty acts which led to them. If he had been unduly angry, he was inclined now to be unduly lenient.

"Come," he said ; "I haven't killed you. Tell me the truth ; what would you have done with the ring if you had found it ? "

Bissy, morally chastened, gulped and snuffled.

"I should have done the honest thing, signore."

"Good boy," said Tiretta. And then he added magnanimously : "Well, if you are successful, you can keep it for your pains."

That was generous of him, since the ring did not belong to him to dispose of—a conclusion perhaps shrewdly appreciated by the owlish urchin.

"I do not want it," said Bissy, aggrieved and righteous. "The most I should expect would be a lira for my trouble. Her Excellency, no doubt, will give me that for her slipper."

"What slipper, boy ? "

"The one she lost in the pool. I found that, though I could not find the other."

A sudden warmth seemed to suffuse Tiretta's whole being. He held out his hand nonchalantly.

"I am staying at Colorno. I shall probably see

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her Highness this afternoon. Give it me, and I will return it to her."

Bissy, still wiping his eyes, shook his head.

"I want the credit myself. Besides, I have not got it with me."

"Listen here: I will give you a golden ducat for it."

"Why, signore?"

Why, indeed? The shameful fool blushed before that small inquisitor. He stammered:

"I—I offended her Highness that day. It will serve as a peace-offering."

"A dirty one," said Bissy. "It is all stained and muddy."

Tiretta had one infallible argument with the obdurate. It was the one which came to him naturally and confidently. He put his hand quite caressingly on the boy's shoulder.

"Very well," he said: "it does not matter. But, inasmuch as I have wronged you, child, I am going to atone with a song. Would you like to hear me make music?"

"If you please, signore."

Tiretta penetrated a little way among the trees, and stopped, resting his back against a trunk.

"Sit there," he said; and Bissy, allured and wondering, squatted before him like a toad.

The troubadour unstrung his instrument, and, tuning it a moment softly at his ear, wandered into a symphony as sweet as falling flowers. His eyes,

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as he played, grew dreamy and remote ; he forgot his purpose and his company ; the spirit of the haunted place stole into his brain, drugging it to oblivion of all else. The words came, when they came, independent of his own volition, it seemed :

“ I know not what I love—

A shadow, a delight,
Like the morning moon,
Thin wraith of her that night
Bared warm to my impassioned dreams,
And now so cold and distant seems.

“ I know not that I love—

Yet one flower from its breast
Doth breathe a sweeter perfume
Than it ever once possest.
And why this is I do not know,
But only joy that it is so.

“ I know not what is love

But a thing of whims and hates,
Since what my dreams fulfil to me
Her scorn repudiates
The moment that my eyes, awake,
Would close for ever for her sake.”

He ended on a tumbled note ; and to the sense of a sudden creeping in his heart. Something had moved on the threshold of the grove hard by. Bissy, his mouth agape, scrambled to his pudgy feet.

“ It is Madonna,” said the boy. And then, approaching Tiretta, he whispered, “ you shall have the slipper, signore,” and, retreating, scuttled from the grove, ducking his obeisance to the lady as he passed.

Tiretta remained motionless, a feeling of strange

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awe, of strange guilt at his heart. And, as he stood, she came on and passed him, and was gone into the grove.

Its sweet and fitting apparition ; her footfall had seemed to make no sound ; her robe was white as mist ; one moment she had turned her grave innocent eyes to his, whether in wonder or rebuke he could not tell, and so in silence had moved on. He almost believed it, in truth, to be a spirit, conjured up of his unconscious rhapsody. Had she heard it, marked it, resented it ? He hardly knew himself of what he had sung ; from what spring of unearthly emotion what passion had risen into expression. Only this he knew—that no thought of friendship, of loyalty to another's interests had inspired him.

Why should it have ? It was no new thing for such abstract sentiments, bubbling up from the soundless deeps of his soul, to find on his lips their irresistible utterance. He was the voice on these occasions of something beyond his control, of something for which he could not be held responsible.

He stirred, in a sudden revulsion of feeling. A little heat of anger overtook him, and he consigned Fanchette to the devil. It was she who had tempted him into this situation, with her common winks and becks and nudges, so to speak—tempted him, and only to be snubbed for his pains. Why should he submit to being thus passed over, as if he had sinned against some code of conduct or good taste ? He

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would follow, and ask her Highness point blank if his presence in the grove was desired or not.

Yet a thrill ran through his veins as he moved to give effect to his resolution. He felt it, and set his teeth, frowning, as a man might who resents his own blushes over some innocuous malapropism into which he has been betrayed.

She had paused among the trees at a little distance away, a slender spirit-like figure, seeming half diaphanous in the shadowy glow of things, claimed both of fancy and reality, like a leaf-dappled hamadryad. His mandolin slung over his arm, he went straight up to her, and, standing erect, the soldier uppermost, spoke out his thought :

“ My presence here is unwelcome to your Highness ? ”

Her face looked pale ; there was still a wonder in her eyes as she turned to him :

“ It was quite unforeseen, monsieur.”

He bowed.

“ I accept the rebuke. My coming was due to a misapprehension, for which I am not responsible. But the mistake is soon remedied.”

Her eyes seemed to wonder more and more. And then the faintest flush stole to her cheek.

“ Do you not like my orange grove, monsieur ? ” she said.

“ It is beautiful,” he answered. “ I seem doomed unwittingly to desecrate your Highness’s chosen retreats.”

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She looked down a moment ; a minutest smile rose to her lips :

“ I have no claim to it really,” she said ; “ only I love its sweetness and solitude. Bissy is its inspiring genius—as you seem to have discovered.”

He saw the sparkle in the eyes she raised, and stood spellbound by it.

“ I had wronged the boy—hurt him,” he said very seriously ; “ and my song was in the nature of an atonement.”

“ A strange one, surely, for a boy’s hurt.” She was grave all at once. “ What had he done to offend you ? ”

“ Will you please not to ask me ? I am a hasty fool in many things.”

“ You mean you sometimes give pain without intending it ? ”

He bowed his head.

“ Monsieur,” she said, very earnestly, “ in that case will you throw away that flower from your button-hole ? ”

He seemed to have instinctively known what was coming. He put his hand over the withered posy.

“ My theme,” he said—“ that night—it cannot have hurt you. Madame herself proposed it.”

“ Whence did you gather your theme ? ” she asked him.

“ From the floor of the arbour,” he answered. “ What then ? It was of his Highness’s martyrdom I made it the text.”

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She sought his eyes, a wistful pain lined between her own.

“ Ah ! ” he said, before the appeal on her lips could be spoken ; “ do not insist. Let me buy my right to it with a song—a dream—a memory—something I cannot explain otherwise.”

He had caught at his instrument ; a madness seemed to have risen in his brain, desperate, inspired, overbearing, all in one ; he hardly knew what he was saying or doing—only that some passion, insidious, unrealised till this moment, was mastering and overwhelming him. “ Listen,” he whispered, while she stood before him white and wondering—“ hear what it means to me—what emotions—what old sweet agonies of death and parting.” The music came to him, the words, the throbbing anguish of it, as he spoke :

“ Love-in-a-mist ! Blue eyes in tangled hair—
Wet eyes that brim through lashes of dark rain—
Where have I known your mystery, your pain ?
In what green gardens kissed your soft despair ?

“ There was a parting once—but when ? but where ?
I ask it of my heart, and ask in vain—
Only a wild voice weeps across the main :
‘ Love-in-a-mist ! Wet eyes in tangled hair ! ’ ”

He ended ; and a dead silence ensued. Then the girl, moving like one half stupefied, and with a sigh that seemed to rend her bosom, took a single step away and stopped.

“ Forgive me,” said Tiretta. His mood was spent,

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exhausted for the moment ; he could only utter that broken prayer.

She put her hand to her eyes, and seemed to stumble. He was by her side in a moment. " I did not mean it ! " he said hoarsely. " God knows what tempted me ! "

She looked up at him then very piteously.

" What gardens ? " she whispered, as if she could have wept.

He answered like one in a dream :

" There were green bays ; and the mist was over everything. Strange shapes came and went in it—they shrank and dilated. And the eyes of the women were like heaven in April—strange wet blue eyes behind the rain. They come out of sleep : they have haunted me since childhood—the strange eyes—the wild visions of the North. Ah, do not think me mad, Madonna ! "

His breast was heaving, his hands entreating. She moved on, motioning to him to walk beside her. As they passed slowly together through the sweet scented shadows, he grew more composed—and she also, it seemed. Presently she spoke to him, in a low earnest voice :

" Will you try to forget it—never to let it be again ? "

She held out her hand ; and, like a man who delivers his own death-warrant, he detached the faded flower from his breast, and laid it reverently in that soft palm.

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"Condemn me," he muttered, walking with bowed head, "to a traitor's death. I deserve the worst."

"It was a momentary possession," she answered. "The evil thing is gone."

He sighed. "As I must go—as I must go, lest it come again."

She did not answer. Stealing a look at her, he saw something in her face which made him knot his fingers together, as if forcibly to control some scarce endurable emotion. And so they wandered on, as it were in a tragic trance, both soul-stricken and both dumb. Threading the golden trees, as if always to weave deeper the silences between themselves and the common world, they came out presently, unconscious of how they had reached it, upon a green sward sloping to the river. And there the man turned, and gazed upon his companion.

"Do you not recognise the place?" he said—"of my shame?"

He saw her lips move, and the tears gather in her eyes.

"No, of mine."

Could mortal fortitude forbear—endure further? With one mad step he had her in his arms, and their lips met.

CHAPTER XI

SWEET BASIL

FANCHETTE was chattering to Aquaviva, like the intolerable magpie he thought her, when a couple, issuing from the orange grove, came into her ken approaching up a flowery path. She was silent instantly—a relief so grateful to the old gardener, that he was moved to raise his head from his work to examine into the cause of it. He grunted his satisfaction :

“ That is a mercy. You will attend to your own duties now instead of interfering with mine.”

Fanchette tossed her head.

“ What an old bear, to be sure ! I shall have to withdraw my patronage.”

“ Do,” said Aquaviva. “ It will be the better for my reputation.”

She would have retorted, only that she was intent on other things. As the couple came near, she ran to her mistress, and smoothed and fondled her with a privileged intimacy.

“ Ah ! you have been exploring, you bad demoiselle, careless, as always, of your poor Fanchette’s credit. Look at the moss stains on your

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skirt, and the flower crushed in your bosom ! And the sun has caught your neck and face, too, naughty mistress."

As she readjusted things with dainty fluttering fingers, she just glanced with an arch smile at Tiretta—a little telegraphic signal, full of comprehension and meaning. He looked away immediately.

"There, that will do, Fanchette," said Isabella, flushing finely. "It is time we went home, is it not ? What is grandfather doing there ?"

"He is doing something horrible, disgusting. You will not like to see it."

More to escape an embarrassment than from any awakened curiosity, Isabella walked on. Tiretta, dropping behind a moment, whispered in the maid's ear :

"Little liar !"

"If you please, monsieur," murmured Fanchette demurely.

"She never expected me."

"Did I not say so ?"

"You implied that she did."

"And was that why you came ?"

He drew up, baffled. She gave a tiny laugh.

"It was to convince me of the wickedness of my innuendo, was it not ?" she whispered. "Well, I am convinced, monsieur."

He had better have been silent from the first. She put a finger to her lips.

THE POT OF BASIL

"Hush!" she said. "You can trust in me—you can always trust in me."

He should have answered; should have repudiated, then and finally, the implication. He hesitated—and the next moment they had overtaken the Infanta, where she had paused beside the old perfumer.

"Grandfather, what is that in your hand?"

The old man rose, groaning as he straightened his back. He held by the handle a lipped vessel, half-full of a sluggish ruby liquid.

"You should know," he said. "It is what your loved oranges grow rich and fat on."

"Not blood?"

"Bullocks' blood."

Isabella, with an exclamation of horror, shrunk back.

"Those are not oranges, my friend," said Tiretta.

He pointed to a row of little shrubs or herbs, set in earthenware jars against a sunny wall. They were green and bushy, and the vessels were of many colours, fancifully designed and decorated.

"They are sweet basil, or basil-thyme, master," said Aquaviva—"a common stock, until enriched by good feeding. It is the way of the world all over. It is blood which makes the quality—meat-juice, and plenty of it. These are having their first weaning, and the result will show in a year, or maybe two or three. Simple enough in themselves, they will flower, when they do, fit to grace a lady's bower.

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'Tis said they flourish best on the blood of murdered men."

"Come away, Fanchette," said Isabella. But the maid lingered.

"Harkee, my friend," said Tiretta: "I will buy one of your basils unweaned—that pretty one at the end there in the green jar—and back it against all the rest to flower first and smell the sweetest."

"As you will, master—and be a fool for your pains."

Tiretta saw the young lady into her carriage—a service accepted by her very formally and silently—and presently rode back to Colorno, his purchase under his arm.

CHAPTER XII

PAOLO AND FRANCESCA

“ . . . deep into the dying day
The happy princess followed him.”

IT had been one delirious moment snatched from the hands of fate. So it was understood between them—an impulsive contact, passionate, transient, never to be spoken of or repeated. Isabella might, if she would, have made of that mute stipulation a definite compromise with her conscience, since a princess, no less than any other woman, was free to barter her lips for one instant of delight, provided she incurred thereby no after responsibility towards their ravisher. There were flowers, in the world of gallantry, to be sipped, as well as hives to be plundered ; and one was not called upon to hold oneself bound to every honey-loving freebooter whom one permitted to settle a moment and taste.

She might have thought thus, I say ; only, if she had, she would not have been the passion-pure child, innocent and affectionate, of our knowledge. She was, in fact, very troubled, very shamed, over what she had done, or allowed to be done. And yet her heart, conscious-guilty as it might feel, would thrill in the memory of that moment. Though she had

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since made one to that unspoken compact of silence and abstention, she never had a thought but that that instant of emotional self-surrender had delivered her, a rightful captive, into the hands of her conqueror. She could never now love another man ; only her love must be content to remain for all time an abstraction, a pathetic dream, impossible of realisation. If only they would consent to leave it so ; to let her die unwedded—perhaps in the peaceful seclusion of a cloister.

So a single kiss wrought on this loving nature, that it had for her the tragic sanctity of a pledge. It did not matter how extenuated by good resolutions. The fire once kindled would not so be quenched. : Nor would the cold water these two engaged themselves to throw on their own heart-burnings have any effect but to make the heat glow presently the fiercer. That is a mere chemical commonplace, and, unless love is to be accepted for something other than a matter of gases and combustion, follows of necessity. Fire, to be put out by water, must be put out, and not simply fed.

It is true that, in the first of the reaction from that madness, they had both shrunk back aghast over the magnitude of the peril they had touched and escaped. Yet the very sympathy engendered of that common fright was fatal. It constituted between them a secret which by habit became a tender and a passionate one. Whatever distance was affected in their relations, there was that know-

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ledge to obliterate it. They were at all times and in all places conscious of it and of one another.

And so, what was to be the end? An idle problem. If love could think of ends and retributions, love would not be love but sanity.

They continued to meet—were they not expected to meet? That was the mortal irony of it all. Omnipotence laid no embargo on their friendship—applauded and encouraged it, rather. The signs of their better understanding filled the old *gouvernante* with jubilation. “He comes to vindicate my belief in him,” she wrote to the duke. “In a little you will find the girl converted to your wishes.”

And Tiretta? He did not succumb without a struggle. He hated his own treachery, but he could not hate himself, so sanctified of that idyllic passion. For long he fought desperately to command his own humorous, philosophical, independent view of things—to remain “the master of his fate, the captain of his soul.” And all the time he knew that his only resource lay in flight; and he said to himself, “I await no more than her dismissal.” But she never spoke the word that was to banish him and kill his heart, and he said, “To abandon her unbidden, to leave her to bear the brunt of this alone, were to play the part of a coward.”

Specious, perhaps; yet in a measure the truth; only that his own defences weakened while he lingered.

And then at length he could battle no more, but,

spent and exhausted, gave up the struggle. He was like a man who, having swum too far from shore in a tide-race, and seeking to return, grows slowly and agonisingly conscious of the futility of his efforts, and yields himself first to despair and then to resignation, keeping no more than afloat as he drifts out into the unknown. He had done his best, but the tide was too strong for him. Let those who had committed him to the effort take upon their own consciences the result.

In the first, pitying her embarrassment in his presence, responding, as he believed, to her unspoken wish, he rather avoided her ; or, when they met, addressed her only with a grave and formal courtesy. The inevitable change happened one day when they chanced upon one another near the green harbour sacred to an unforgettable memory. She was standing there alone, looking down upon her own lily-pond, when he came upon her, and he would have withdrawn, with a low-spoken apology, only she stayed him. He stopped, his every vein tingling, beside her. She did not speak for a moment ; and then she looked up in his face, with a sudden desperate resolve in her eyes.

" That day," she said hurriedly—" when I spoke to you at last—I had meant it to show I was sorry for my rudeness. Why did you snub me about my lilies ? I think you love the children better than you do me."

" Love !" He repeated the word like one stupefied.

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She was so unsophisticated, so incapable of maintaining, in the face of apparent unkindness, the pose to which her conscience had condemned her, that she was unable to qualify her reproach by a word.

He stood as if stunned ; then very gently sought her unresisting hand, and raised it to his lips.

“ If I might love you ! ” he whispered, imprisoning the soft palm, and gathering it fearfully to his breast. “ But it is madness.”

“ I thought you meant to show me so,” she answered—“ that that was why you avoided me.”

“ And if I did—what else was possible ? ” A long ecstatic sigh quivered from his lips. “ I must go,” he said. “ It is the only way. You must forget me and forgive me.” He bent suddenly, and looked in her face ; and his voice broke. “ O, my love, my love—keep back your tears ! ”

Gently she released her hand, turning away from him. And he strode a step or two, hither and thither, in unbearable pain.

“ Why have they laid this cruelty on us ? ” he said. “ I cannot live and endure it. Tell me to go.”

“ I cannot.”

So near inaudible—so whispered from a bursting heart ! He felt as if his own heart would break with the rapture of it. Again he turned from her, and strode forth and back.

“ Prometheus ! ” he cried. “ Give me my fire ! I defy the gods ! Afloat on the long drift of dreams—everything surrendered ; everything believed pos-

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sible ; no to-morrow to this ecstasy. Isabel, we will be sweet lovers, my sweet love."

One beautiful moment, in that embowered place, he held her in his arms ; then put her gently from him.

" That I must teach you duplicity ! " he said—
" so truthful, so innocent ! But we must be circumspect, or the dream will end. It is all a dream, is it not, dear love ? "

She could not kill the happiness in her eyes ; but she made them grave for his behoof.

" If we might talk," she said ; " knowing what we know, but never alluding to it ; keeping for ever that dear secret—even from one another."

" For ever ! " he said. " Well, what have we to do with time ? I would rather be mad than sane. Talk on, sweet music."

" I have so much to say—and yet I have nothing. I think you have come into my heart, and that no words are needed there."

" Yet we must talk, being mortal, for lucidity's sake. Tell me, how did I steal in ? "

" I cannot. Your voice made me sorry ; and then—my own cruelty. Were you thinking of that when you sang to Bissy ? "

" I suppose so."

" I was frightened of myself, monsieur."

" Monsieur ? "

" What can I call you ? "

" I will tell you. My real name is not that I am

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known by—a nom de guerre, in literal truth. My own I laid to rest long years ago, never again to be revived. But love knows its own resurrections. I will tell you. It is for your sweet ears, for your sweet lips alone; and you will keep my secret, Isabel? ”

She promised, and to the end was faithful to her vow.

“ And now,” said he, “ where is my flower ? ”

To his rapture, she brought the little withered spray out from her bosom, and kissed it once and gave it to him.

“ It shall lie on my dead heart,” he said.

Her voice was full, her eyes were shining, as she answered :

“ It gave me a living one, I think. O, love, the strangeness and the sorrow of your music ! It robbed me of my soul, of my will, that day I listened here.”

He gazed at her, his eyes rapt and dreaming.

“ It was the rain,” he said. “ Such a wild wet day, after long heat, brings to me always, like no other, the passion of the past.”

“ Your past ? ”

“ How can I say ? Old pictures, old hauntings, young dead faces—the air is full of their streaming, the wind of their voices. And I know them, yet they are strange to me ; I hear them, yet they utter no word. They were all born and perished ages before I reached the world ; they come out of the

wild beautiful places, the mists and mysteries of the green gardens where I kissed your eyes—yes, *your* beautiful eyes, beloved.”

“Not to part?” she whispered.

He did not answer, but he put his lips to the dead flower before he hid it in his breast.

“Are you terrified of me?” he said. “Do you think me mad?” And she answered, dwelling on his face: “Be mad, if to abandon me were reason.”

Drowned in that sunny ecstasy, they both stood silent for awhile. Then Tiretta sighed and stretched his shoulders, as if in blissful waking from a dream; and he looked with a tender humour at his comrade.

“I am not all moonstruck,” he said. “I would not have you think that of me, lady. I have rubbed shoulders with life. I can be practical on occasion. This tendency to rhapsodising is a sort of possession that visits me at times. It puts visions in my mind and words on my lips. Hold the North responsible for it.”

“You speak so strangely of the North,” she said wistfully; “and often I think your eyes are turned to it.”

“Over the long wastes of water. It shines there so mistily,” he answered; “it blossoms so full of faint entreating faces. Is it the way home, I wonder—the path to that real unknown God, the God of utter love, to whom, shrinking from the Jehovah of Israel, we are for ever blindly stretching out our arms—the God to whom we turn, as the poor world-

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broken turns from the high-altar to the pitiful Mother, the lovely and grief-hushing in some wonderful, inexplicable way? So it seems to me, my Isabel—the long far lands of home—the shores of unutterable consolation. Shall we go home together some day? ”

She answered like Ruth, a very passion of emotion in her voice.

“ Sweet love,” he said, deeply moved ; “ so dear and strange the North seems to me—a symbol and a mystery. And to reach it at last, just a sleep and a returning. You did not know I was of northern blood? ”

“ No, I did not know.”

“ But I am, Isabel. When was it—when your great - great - great - great - grandfather was on the Spanish throne, and his fleet sailed northward to destroy the heretic. Do you know your house’s history, child—the magnificence and the shame of it? How those little islands, those little hazy islands, planted like green ramparts on the threshold of the unknown, called to their aid the winds and lightnings, and smote the invader, in his presumption, from their seas. And how of that vast flotilla few escaped ; and not one but was disabled ; while many beat round the northern limits, only to be dashed to pieces on the rocks and shoals of the western islands. And of those poor souls who found a landing there, hundreds were slain, and but a handful, sheltered of passion and pity, survived—

pity that gave protection, passion that gave me my ancestors and my name. The sun and the mist meet in my blood, Isabel—the passion and the mystery of life. And sometimes one prevails, and I am human ; and sometimes the other, and I am a seer or a lunatic.”

She listened, wondering a little ; and then said she, “ My strange love ; let me look in your eyes.”

Smiling and unmoving he faced her ; and she stood gazing in silence. Presently she said : “ I have always wondered ; and now I know. They are brown ; and yet they are blue. It is the sea gleaming through their shadows.”

“ It is the North,” he answered—“ whither we are flying some day—you and I together, dear love. Listen ! ”

He took his lute, and sang softly to her :

“ Where the sea and sky meet,
Kissing far away, •
O, come, love ! O, come, love,
Daring salt and spray !
There join earth and heaven,
Each fulfilled in bliss.
O, northward, love, come northward,
Where the strange thing is !

“ Where the storm-bow's shining
Standeth where God stood,
O, set thy little foot, love,
Safe from wreck and flood !
Dim and far in the raining
Lights gleam mystical.
O, northward, love, come northward,
Where strange things befall ! ”

CHAPTER XIII

TOKENS

HE talked, having a willing listener—she laughed at him for a chatterbox. He had long fits of silence—she tried to enter into his dreams. Sometimes he was moody and troubled ; and she knew why, and blamed herself for his self-reproach ; sometimes, and that most often, they drifted soul to soul on a halcyon tide, and let the world go, and forgot everything but themselves and the rapture of living.

And they met and met ; and still were faithful to their platonic compact. It was pretty to mark their idyll ; but Nature, while she hung them with flowers, was for ever a little impatient of their content.

Nobody interfered with them ; their intimacy was encouraged rather than suspected ; the world conspired for their ruin. They were so little put to it to practise any duplicity, that their consciences almost came to acquit them of the necessity for it. In company they were called upon to display no greater decorum than good taste would have imposed upon a betrothed couple ; and elsewhere, on the strength of that mutual understanding, they

could consort in honest seeming, as if no guilty thought were at their hearts.

And, indeed, there was none in Isabella's—a child of seventeen, and in love. Guilt is for criminals, who work the other way and through hate of their kind. Fanchette's soul should have been the guilty one.

One day Tiretta took a queer object from his pocket. It was down in the deep gardens, and they were alone together again.

"Do you see that?" he said. It was a little white slipper, woefully grubby.

"If you please, Bonbec," she answered. It was her name for him, quaint in its underlying confidence, but betraying nothing to chance ears.

"Well, do you not recognise it?"

"No. Stay——" she laughed and flushed. "Is it really the recovered relic of that day?"

"Relic?—indeed it is."

"Horrible dirty little thing!"

"May I keep it?"

"O, Bonbec!"

"That and the flower—a priceless pair."

"Priceless, indeed. What presents I make you!"

"I gave Bissy gold for this."

"O, then, it is invaluable!"

"Lady, I have slept with it every night under my pillow."

"I should at least have pulled off the heel if I had been you."

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“ Tell me, may I keep it ? ”

“ I wish I might give you something worth your taking, Bonbec.”

“ Saving yourself, I could wish no dearer gifts. They speak heaven to me—yes, the little soiled slipper and the little crumpled flower. So much so that, in fairness, I want to make you as inestimable a gift in return. Isabel, will you take my pot of basil, and cherish it for me ? ”

“ I will love to—dearly I will.”

“ It is so inconsiderable a thing, it would pass for a mere compliment. I have a strange feeling about it—now do not wonder why, or whence it comes—that its flowering will coincide with our loves’ triumph ; that it waits to be the symbol of our bridal. Is not that an odd superstition—irrational, meaningless ; and yet somehow I cannot shake it off.”

He smiled ; but his eyes were serious. She answered as movingly :

“ If love can make it flower, dear my heart, that day shall come quickly.”

“ So I feel it,” he said. “ Tend it ; touch it ; breathe on it—no more will be needed. It will think the spring is in its green veins ; it will open its little smiling eyes, like a waking infant, to you its mother. Fancy it our sleeping baby, Isabel.”

They were silent for awhile, the girl looking down with flushed cheeks. Presently she said :

“ Will Bissy wonder, do you think ? ”

“ Bissy ? ”

“ Why you gave him gold for it—that other ? ”

“ Ah-ha ! Bissy is astute, a shrewd calculating elfin. He will not kill his goose with the golden eggs. The mine is not emptied of its possibilities for him. Trust him to be silent ; and perish all scruples ! ”

He deprecated meeting trouble half-way ; he bade her just drift and be happy. He was in one of his irresponsible moods, indolent and garrulous. Sometimes, he told her, he felt like a warm mass of animated jelly, afloat on a tropic sea, and just dreamily conscious of the sun and the soft swaying of the water. If only he could roll lazily round, and feel the contact of his lady radiate, and with her drift on for ever through the glassy silences !

“ But I think there would be two sides to that,” responded Isabella very sensibly ; “ and only one would be turned to the sun. Picture the black abysses underneath, and what might rise up from them.”

He laughed :

“ Then we will be two birds floating on tranced wings through the limitless blue.”

“ And the storms, Bonbec ? ”

“ Then two angels, it must be ; and think of another side to that if you can.”

“ I can only think of God, Bonbec.”

He looked at her, and laughed again ; but suddenly was silent.

That night Fanchette, preparing her mistress

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for bed, made an impromptu statement, quite innocently :

“ I have put the pot of basil in your Highness’s chambre-à-coucher.”

Isabella, guilty of an involuntary start, paused a moment to recover her self-possession.

“ What pot of basil, girl ? ”

“ O ! I thought your Highness would know. It was delivered as from M. le chevalier, with his respectful compliments.”

“ I recollect now. M. Tiretta, uncertain of his movements, begged me to hold the stakes, as it were, between himself and Aquaviva. You remember the challenge ? ”

Indeed, that explanation of his gift had been offered to the Infanta by M. Tiretta himself ; and not as a contingent one. If there was to be any question of subterfuge, the guilt should rest with him.

Fanchette remembered very distinctly.

“ I think then, with your Highness’s permission, it is well placed where it is,” she said.

Isabella, her colour a little heightened, found a difficulty in asking why.

“ O, I have a sentiment about these things,” said Fanchette. “ Warm thoughts will make the flowers in one’s bosom open prematurely—I have noticed that.”

“ Are you proposing to me,” said Isabella, “ to wear this entire bush as a posy ? ”

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“ Well, warm dreams, then,” said the maid. “ They will make a very forcing-house of one’s bedroom—mademoiselle will see, if she has any love for this plant. It will come to blossom while she slumbers. Or perhaps she would rather I removed it. It is not good, say some people, to breathe in sleep the same air with flowers. They are like sweet-tongued suitors, best shut the other side of the door.”

“ That will do, Fanchette. You are allowing your tongue too much freedom.”

“ O, I did not mean to imply anything,” quoth injured innocence. “ Your Highness, if you please, is so ready to think the worst of Fanchette. Only what I will venture to say is that, if you are not on the side of M. Tiretta in this business, it will be sensible of you to let me put the basil-pot elsewhere.”

“ I am not, however, the least troubled with these scruples,” said Isabella courageously. “ As you have put it there, it may remain, since its leaves at least smell sweet. And if I find I suffer from its neighbourhood, it will be simple to remove it.”

“ O, if you ask me, I do not think you will suffer from it ! ” said the maid, airily pert.

“ Good-night, Fanchette ! ”

“ Good-night, your Highness, and fruitful dreams.”

The alcove where the Infanta slept had in it a little dim hanging lamp, which burnt all night. It was enough and no more to betray in shadowy

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contour the half-visionary sweetness of the face upon the pillow, the rounded shoulder, the waxen hand. She lay, on this night, so still, she hardly seemed to breathe. She was listening, her lips just parted, to the sounds in the great house dying away in the distance one by one. The last door boomed its remote thunder ; the step of a sentry passed beneath her window, and attenuated and ceased ; a profound stillness reigned everywhere. Then, sitting up, she sat thrilling a moment, and slid softly from her bed. Listening again, as if half fearful of what her own longing might bring upon her, she crept bare-footed, in her ghostly night-robe, to the table where her treasure lay, and knelt, and put her arms about it, and buried her face in the fragrant leaves.

“ My baby,” she whispered—“ open, open your pretty eyes, and make me happy. Did I deny you ? It was for love’s sake and your father’s, most dear. He would tell you so if he were here.”

CHAPTER XIV

CONFESSION

SOMEWHERE I have read or heard of a marine invertebrate, which, when its stomach disturbs it, throws the oppressive thing away and gets a new one. It is a beautifully simple solution of the problem of life—which problem unquestionably has its centre in those regions—and as triumphant in its utter banality as the method of Columbus with his egg or of Alexander with his Gordian knot. Without doubt, if man had been constructed on that principle, his history would have needed not a thousandth part of the apology which is now a necessary accompaniment of its recital. The myriad ills attendant on digestion, the brutalities, the tremors and the hallucinations, would have entirely lacked their excuse. Conceive the practical humour of the statement that one had no stomach for an enterprise; conceive such a solution of the saturnalian difficulty as Vitellius never dreamed. A permanent and undetachable stomach was certainly the actual curse which Satan inflicted on mankind.

The nearest approach to this impossibly beatific condition consists, as popularised by the Catholic and Universal Church, in throwing away one's

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conscience and getting a new one. The priest conducts the process, and the medium is the confessional. Therein the distressing load may be cast, and therefrom the patient be discharged re-equipped. It has all the efficacy of the other, though at the same time hardly its simplicity. For one thing, one cannot do it alone by oneself; for another, a dose of penance is conditional on the treatment—usually a trifle, but sufficient to leave a taste in one's mouth. However, it is a useful alternative.

Fanchette's conscience did not often oppress her; but, on the rare occasions when it did, there was always this means at hand to rid herself of its burden. She would go to the little church in the village, ring up Father Leone, and empty her reservoir of sins upon that good man's devoted head. Then, cleansed and chastened, she would come forth in a rare condition for fresh frolics, the first taste whereof would be comparable with that of a cigarette after a Turkish bath.

These moral "drenchings," however, though easeful in their results, were painful enough in their process to make a resort to them unwelcome. Fanchette had a constitutional dislike to confessing herself guilty of anything—except of the best intentions; and it was only the recognised destination of those abstract virtues which drove her from time to time to appeal to Providence in the matter of their better understanding, so far as she was con-

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cerned. It was in some ways, in this connection, a convenience that Father Leone was both old and deaf ; that he was, moreover, an absorbed herbalist, and, if the truth must be spoken, far more interested in vegetable physiology than in Christian ethics. Yet again, to accuse oneself to dull ears had its drawbacks, since the self-exposure necessitated could command no consolation of sympathy to ameliorate its own ugly nakedness. On the whole, perhaps, she would have preferred an intent and properly responsive listener ; but, since that was not to be had, she must put up with what was. After all, to confess was the thing ; and, if the priest was deaf, it was no business of hers to question Providence as to its selection or affliction of its own ministers.

Fanchette's conscience had been troubling her, and one afternoon Fanchette went across to the church to renew it. She went very staid and unapproachable, paying no heed to the jests of rude men or the quizzings of gossips. A cavalier, walking up the street, espied the demure figure at a distance away, and dodged behind a corner to avoid recognition by it. Peeping thence, he saw the young woman approach the church, and disappear within its portals, when, convinced of her mission, he immediately came forth and followed in pursuit.

The church of Santa Maria was a dull little edifice, and had been rendered duller by the former duke, Don Philip's elder brother, who, on his promotion to

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the crown of Naples, had transferred everything of value from it to his new capital. Without, it was a mere whited sepulchre; within, its necessary appointments exhibited just what decency demanded and no more. Don Carlos had fairly pillaged the building, in fact, and the dross of plate and pinchbeck which remained was hardly worth the considering. From its tinselled high altar to its little paper-petticoated Virgin in an alcove near the door, it was all cheap and tawdry. There were some depressing "stations of the cross" on the walls, and, in a dark place under a painted window, a single confessional box, having a stall for the priest in the middle, and on either side a curtained recess for penitents. When one of these latter desired relief, he or she must pull a little bell-handle in the wall near the altar-rails, the sound caused by which summoned the sacristan, who in his turn summoned the priest from his presbytery hard by.

The cavalier, passing the church portals, went straight up to this presbytery and knocked on its door. He was a little pinchbeck in seeming, like the candlesticks—eloquent somehow of polish without and cheap metal within. He was rather short than tall, neatly built, with very black eyebrows, and in his face a pert insolence suggestive of a popular *café-chanteur's*. Perfumed, self-assured, and brilliantly veneered, M. la Coque was able to pass with the vulgar for a very complete gentleman. Women, who alone in nature exceed their lords in the gor-

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geousness of their plumage, found his fine colouring vastly attractive: Fanchette, we know, found it irresistible.

After a short interval the door was opened by Gaspare, the sacristan, who was also general servitor to the meagre household. He was a snuffy old fellow, hoarse-spoken, and with a leery acquisitive eye. He greeted the visitor, with an air as of being on a footing of sly pleasantry with him.

"Ha, signore! What plenary indulgence now for what mischief? Is the market closed to your worship in Parma, that you must come all the way here to get relief?"

La Coque pushed the old man within and closed the door after them.

"Coquin!" he whispered: "be quiet! The indulgence I ask is at your disposal and worth to you just a silver ducat. Come along now. Is his reverence safe bestowed?"

"What wickedness is forward? I don't budge until I know."

"Hark to that chink, Gaspare! A double silver ducat to line your old breeches withal! Where is his reverence, I say?"

"Where the last trump wouldn't disturb him. In the garden, reading."

"Excellent. When the bell rings for confession I will go and be his substitute."

The sacristan fairly gasped in his breath.

"What, you will! Do you understand that at

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the first word the devil will pull you down by the legs through the floor ? ”

“ O, the devil loves a jest, Gaspare, as much as you do ! ”

“ O ! A jest is it ? ”

“ Of course—what else. Quick—there goes the bell ! Find me a hood and cassock.”

“ Who is it ? ”

“ Well, there is no harm in confessing. Mademoiselle Becquet.”

“ Ah-ha ! ” The old rascal’s face puckered like a monkey’s. “ An assignation ? ” He shook his head and waved his hands in rebukeful protest ; then turned, and shuffled before, sighing, sighing :

“ It is sacrilege ; I wash my hands of it ; you will pay in advance, signore ? ”

Fanchette, kneeling in the church alone, gabbled little prayers, and reviewed her programme between whiles. Then she rose, rang the bell, summoned the sacristan, stated her requirements, and withdrew to the confessional-box, where she disposed herself on her knees behind one of the curtains. Shortly she heard the altar rail click, a slow step approach, and her view through the grating towards the chancel was suddenly obscured by the interposition of a bowed, scarce distinguishable head. She settled herself for the ordeal.

“ Please, father, give me absolution for what I am about to confess.”

“ A timore inimici eripe animam tuam,” responded

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the seated figure, in a low, mumbling voice.
“ Deliver yourself, my daughter.”

The penitent hesitated a moment, as if calling up her nerve ; bit her lower lip, and began :

“ I have to accuse myself, first and foremost, of infidelity.”

“ That is bad. Is it spiritual or secular infidelity to which you refer, my child ? ”

“ Infidelity to my lover, father.”

A sudden cough seemed to catch the listener ; he crowed a little as he answered :

“ To be sure. There will be some good reason for this apostacy, no doubt.”

“ It is to be found, father, in my own conscience, which shrinks from the load he would have put upon it.”

“ What load ? Be specific, child. Has he tempted you to wrong ? ”

“ Not in that way—he knows better. But he desired to use me as his instrument in the ruin of a man he hated.”

“ It is admitted, my daughter, that it is lawful sometimes to do evil that good may come of it. Possibly this lover of yours may have seen in his enemy one of those human abnormalities whose destruction, though demanded by every moral law, can only be compassed by craft. In that case you would be doing a positively pious work in helping him. But, as to this infidelity : the word implies, according to my reading of it, a positive no less than

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a negative sentiment ; an attraction as well as a repulsion."

" Yes, father."

" May it conceivably be hinted, then, that you have turned not so much *from* one lover as *towards* another, his rival in your fleeting affections ? "

The penitent did not answer.

" Speak, daughter," said the confessor, rather violently clearing his throat.

" I cannot, with confidence," answered Fanchette, thus adjured, with an air of distressed hesitancy. " Certainly I have felt pity for the man ; and I have heard it said that pity excites in one a feeling of fondness for the pitied—but I do not know."

" You do not ? This is not confession, but equivocation. Tell me the truth at once, if you would be absolved."

" How unsparing you are, father ! What if I do love him—a little ? It is the fault of the first one for imposing such a task on me. He knew my tender heart—he might have foreseen the inevitable result."

" I think he might indeed."

" Besides, though the first one is a musical-box, the second is a nightingale."

" Damnation ! " said the confessor.

" Father ! What do you mean ? "

" I mean that you may go to the devil, Mademoiselle Fanchette Becquet."

" After you, if you please, M. Charles la Coque."

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"What ! you know me ? "

"I saw you first in the street ; I saw you afterwards through this grating as you approached. Could I mistake you, you wicked wretch ? May you be cursed to all eternity for your profanation of this sacred office ! "

La Coque sank back a little into the shadows, then bent forward again, and spoke softly :

"Do you know, Fanchette, I think I am coming out to strangle you."

The young lady, now verging on hysteria, answered with a scornful gasp :

"It would be worthy of a man who could commit such an unutterable meanness—and without a shadow of excuse."

"O, I had my excuse ! I was uncertain of your fidelity ; and you see how I was justified in my doubt. Then this opportunity offered, and I couldn't resist taking it."

"It was Gaspare, I suppose. You corrupt everybody and everything you touch. Well, you know now I hate you."

"All's one for that. It's not your hate but your love that we've got to reckon with. A nightingale, forsooth ! That hired automaton—that painted jackdaw mimicking his betters ! You shall answer for the insult."

"What are you going to do ? "

"I told you."

Actually, with the words, he unbuttoned the hatch

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and stepped forth. She crouched away from him, huddled within the curtain, her breath coming quick. The church was quite empty and silent.

"Come to my loving arms, Fanchette."

She uttered a little whimper.

"If you were not such a vain fool you would understand."

"Understand what?"

"That, knowing who you were, I should not so have betrayed myself, if it had been true."

"It is not true, then?"

"It is true I *do* pity him—and her."

"Pity excites a fonder feeling. You have said it."

She hesitated, saw no way out of the *impasse*, and took refuge in the long-threatened collapse. He succumbed at once.

"O, hush, girl, for heaven's sake! All the world will hear you."

"O—O! I don't care. To be so doubted and put upon; to have served this man as I have; stifled my better feelings for his sake; sought to ruin a mistress, who has never shown me anything but kindness; as good as offered to be the chevalier's abettor and their go-between—and then to be treated as if I were a perfide and a wanton! I will never give my heart to anyone again; I will beg admission into a convent and end my days a spouse of heaven! O—O!"

He was terrified. He knelt down by the strug-

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gling figure, and crushed it within his arms, seeking to suffocate its outcries.

“Fanchette—you are betraying us—for God’s sake compose yourself! There, there, girl—I did not mean it. I believe you, on my soul, to be true to me. We must make our compact binding—indissoluble—never to be questioned from this time by either of us. Come with me—through the sacristy. Gaspare is always my friend—he will be my friend again—and the priest is safe elsewhere. Any moment may bring discovery upon us. Come, lovely and adorable—let us kiss and forgive. Fanchette!”

Little by little, coaxing and caressing, he got her to her feet and away with him. Father Leone, pacing his garden, was left undisturbed to his vegetable meditations, and Fanchette’s conscience had to defer its unloading to a more convenient opportunity.

CHAPTER XV

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

SURPRISED and beset in that moment of unguarded emotionalism, Fanchette had capitulated ; and there was an end to her scruples as a reluctant confederate. With the sacrifice of her self-respect went her last feeling of charity towards hard-pressed virtue. She regarded that now, with the eyes of the qualified *chère-amie*, as an hypocrisy to be derided and shown up. Thenceforth she was in all things her showy tyrant's most devoted auxiliary, to be cursed or fondled, to be used and abused, to be dragged by him by the hair of her head, should he please—and so to revile him and spit at him, and turn with raking fingers on any humane champion who should come to her aid. That is to speak conditionally of Fanchette, but not of the type to which she belonged, and to which she would sooner or later conform. Not that jimp figure of hers, in its striped sarsenet frock with the slim waist, not that demure smile and young mealy complexion, would save her presently from the fate of the termagant, swollen of feature and foul of tongue, to which she was destined. There was in her that seed of Xantippe which is wont, once quickened, to sprout and increase and burst

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into riotous blossom in a night. She was of the substance of the true virago—vulgar, incorruptible, animal ; rending the lust she has provoked ; ready to die whether to spite or to save the object of her desire ; ecstatically courting her own destruction at the hands of the rage she has wantonly excited—and all to prove her utter devotion to and absorption in the one. Such was Fanchette in promise—a sufficient foil, even so undeveloped, to the nobler passion she was called upon to assist in betraying.

That idyllic love should lie at the mercy of such coarse understandings ! But so is it decreed in this paradoxical world of ours, where the myriad inanities sit in judgment on the sapient few, where the rabble overrules the senate, the dunce the scholar, the loud illiterate voice the cultured wit.

La Coque stood for the vulgar majority in this case. His hatred of a finer spirit was simply the expression of an envious and ignoble mind. He was avid to ruin Tiretta, and indifferent as to what other fair fames he besmirched in the process. At the beginning he had had no least grounds, save his own inventive malice, for the scandal at which he had obscurely hinted. Later, when he came to learn that appearances were at least beginning to give colour to his fiction, his joy waxed great and fierce. He began then seriously to contemplate the means and methods by which he might bring this belauded cockerel to his knees. He set Fanchette to watch and to report.

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Enough was soon gathered to give him a clue to his policy. He aimed at nothing more at the outset than the disgrace and recall of his detested rival, as he chose to consider him—an end, nevertheless, which must be effected without compromising the Infanta. He was sharp enough to see that any mistake in that direction might involve himself in ruin. It would be sufficient for his purpose could Tiretta be led, somehow and definitely, into an amorous self-betrayal, armed with the evidences of which it would be easy for anyone to procure the reptile's dismissal. He instructed Fanchette to affect sympathy, to worm herself into the chevalier's confidence, to inveigle him if possible into a pretended intrigue with herself, on the score that it would at once cover his real design and afford him particular opportunities for prosecuting it. He instructed her so to manage appearances, in fine, that at the right moment M. Tiretta could be represented to the duke for the traitor he actually was, and to the Infanta as having been secretly prosecuting all this time a discreditable *affaire* with her own serving maid.

And to this pretty programme, Fanchette, a procuress for love's sake, was amiably prepared to subscribe—even though she might endanger her own emotions in the process. For she certainly found a fearful joy in playing with the fire kindled for another's consuming.

As material for the plot, that little scene in the corridor had had its timely uses. It had put her and

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her gentleman on a confidential footing, which that later whispered colloquy had encouraged and his own indecision confirmed. Thereafter he must suffer her secret intelligences meekly, and little by little cease of any pretence at misreading them. In truth, poor fool, in the torment of self-reproach he must endure, the solace of a sympathetic ally was hardly to be refused. Somehow it seemed to make him feel less guilty.

Not that he frankly countenanced Fanchette's partisanship, or ever appeared to assume an inner meaning from it. But, like the artless receivers of stolen goods we hear of, he accepted its fruits unquestioning, and, when she made profitable opportunities for him, took them with the most ingenuous air possible. He thought, in truth, she was a friend, and so played in all things into her hands.

The main thing was, for his greater exposure and degradation, to discredit him in Isabella's eyes. Fanchette took a peculiar pleasure in that moiety of her task. One day, having manœuvred to come upon him alone in the grounds, she met him point blank with a question which brought him up aghast :

“ Are you in love with me, monsieur ? ”

He stared a moment, and then bungled out a monosyllable :

“ Why ? ”

“ O ! ” she said ; “ it is a fair challenge, is it not ? Tell me—do you think me pretty ? ”

He was beginning to recover his self-possession.

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"Yes, certainly I do, Fanchette," he said.

"Do you take an obvious pleasure in my company?"

"If it is obvious, it is obvious," he answered evasively.

"I will put it another way," she said. "Is it for my sake that you seek it so often?"

"Do I seek it often?"

She put up her face quite close to his, and said mockingly:

"Would you like to kiss me now, monsieur?"

He drew back, with a smiling shake of the head.

"I honour your good fame too well, Fanchette."

She broke into a shrill little laugh.

"O, the darling, the Joseph! And yet he cannot be happy apart from me. Why, I wonder. He will never say—wherefore it behoves the poor rejected one to give him a morsel of advice." She came close again, and perked her chin at him. "Do not think for a moment, monsieur, that I want your love; and as for my good fame, it can look after itself. But, for my company, that is another matter from the point of view of your own interests; and, if you follow my advice, you will continue to pretend to take pleasure in it, if you do not feel any."

"But I do feel pleasure, girl."

"That is well, then; and I say, let your pleasure be as obvious to others as it is to yourself."

He looked his bewilderment, and she derided him:

"How slow of comprehension you are! Why, for

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the reason that they may think this no more than an intrigue with a *femme de chambre*, and so spare you the gossiping and eavesdropping which might otherwise work you mischief. O, understand me, monsieur ! It is friendship which suggests this—not inclination. I do not propose to you to do more than pretend.”

He looked stupefied : “ I believe you are my true friend indeed,” he stammered ; and she laughed, and snapped her fingers in his face, and left him feeling as if he had suddenly pulled up on the brink of an abyss.

A pretended intrigue ! The very thought was profanation to his love—an outrage and a shame. But it embodied a *quasi*-revelation which was even more ashaming. Fanchette knew ; his affectation of artless misunderstanding of her hints and innuendoes was exposed, and finally, for the guilty sham it was. He positively blushed like a child detected in a lie.

Was it a fact, too, that gossip was beginning to whisper ? He had been so absorbed in his dream, had held it in truth so sacred from the world, that he had never so much as imagined that danger from without. Not while the dream lasted—the mad impossible beatitude. And was it already threatening to an end ? He would not believe it—so perfect and so uplifted, risen above the reach of mortal hurts. These shadows were but conditions of its brightness.

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After all, what had he done but follow the path appointed him, and if by the way he had wandered into paradise, that chance was in the itinerary. He had not abused his paradise ; he had simply turned its inspiration into song. In appearance, at least, there was nothing to convict him.

And so he ended with derision for that monstrous suggestion, and a determination utterly to discard it. Yet the thing being always in his mind may have given him thenceforth in Fanchette's company an air of self-consciousness, which the vicious might interpret if they would into a secret understanding.

Let all that pass for the moment. Our theme is still of Isabel and her " young palmer in love's eye " wandering, yet unchallenged, in their unsoiled Eden.

Now June with these bewitched lovers drifted down a golden haze into July, and July itself burned stilly on towards harvest-time. It was the midsummer of their happiness—all the world one soundless tide of light on which their dreaming hearts, like the fairy nautilus, made rainbow sail by mystic strands, and silent moon-drenched gardens, and paths of rippling flame which ran into the sunset. All time was rapture to them, and most when they were silent and together ; for speech is but the sorry change of thought, and cannot for all its volume match one golden maxim of the soul. What they felt, each to the other, was

better understood unspoken ; in sleep alone it found the perfect utterance.

One day, loitering so rapt, they came upon a terrace-corner by the house where, at a man's height above the ground, was a window with a little balcony looking towards the lower gardens. Here were myrtle bushes growing and loading the air with their scent. Beyond, the turf shelved down to meet the leafy margin of the thickets, which enshrined the flowery walks and lily ponds dear to the girl's heart. She paused and pointed to the window.

" Did you know," she asked, " that was my bower, my oratory ? "

He shook his head, smiling.

" It is," she said. " Have I not a beautiful altar to worship at ? "

He understood :

" This view ? the green dale of quietude, with all its lovely secrets. I like best, Madonna, the lilies of your altar-piece."

" Ah, if one could but see them ! "

" It is enough to know they are there, as I know the love that is in your heart. It is sweet, I think, in hiding. But some day it will be sweeter to go down and drown among my lilies. Is the basil in bud yet ? "

" Not yet."

She called him by the name it was only hers to know. He sighed.

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"It is shyer than these myrtles. Why did we not make them the symbol of our bridal? They have the better right. I wonder what it waits for?—my life's blood, perhaps, Aquaviva would say."

She cried "Bonbec!" and looked at him with such a white piteousness that his heart smote him.

"Beloved," he whispered: "That was a senseless and a wicked thought. Forgive me for it. But I wish the basil would blossom. Where do you keep it—in that same dear bower?"

He stood on tiptoe to peep, but could catch no more than a glimpse of daintily flowered silks and hangings, and gilded mirrors, and a sheen of *marqueterie* and ormolu, all in the richly fragile fashion of the day.

"No," she said, still pale and troubled: "In my bedroom, which is above."

He wafted a kiss to that lily sanctuary.

"Could you not, unsuspected, come down from it," he whispered—"just to the little balcony—and speak with me when all the house is silent? To be alone together in the night, my beautiful!"

Her cheek had turned from pale to pink; but she looked at him with unfaltering eyes.

"I will do anything you tell me to," she said.

"Even if it were that, Isabel?"

"It would not be wrong if you told me."

Much moved, he touched her hand, and bade her sleep undisturbed for him. "And speak for me in your prayers," he said.

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“Every night,” she answered, “when I kneel to our unknown God, Bonbec, and pray that some day we may find the print of His footsteps under the rainbow.”

It was his song that was in her mind—that had become, indeed, her new faith’s inspiration. That “passion of the past” of which he had spoken, and into whose ghostly texture her own life seemed woven; those “long far lands of home” towards whose unutterable rest and understanding his spirit sought to convey her—to what more soothing wings of mysticism could she confide her burden of fearful joys and apprehensions? Northward: the world’s unfathomed mystery of the pointing finger: the threshold of the great wonder; and home—not home new made, but home recovered! That was the ecstasy of the thought. They had been wanderers apart these long centuries, and now at last were come together again upon the starry track.

Fond nonsense, was it not? And yet so strangely real to them, that that flight together up the white staircase of the world for ever took them in fancy homewards. When they thought of escape—not spoke, for that had not come yet—those little out-post islands in the cold seas were always their mental refuge and first breathing-place.

But these transcendent moods were not for every occasion. They had their living Eden to engage them, and it was sweet to tread all day on flowers, and hear the drowsy doves murmur, and take the

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sun into their hearts. And so fate allowed it until the golden cup was brimming.

One night—long cause had Tiretta to remember that night with rapture and with grief—the Gonzalès left the two alone together in the *salon* whither the chevalier had been invited to improvise sweet ditties for the ladies' behoof. He had not perhaps acquitted himself very well ; he seldom did under compulsion ; and the marquise had shown signs of boredom. She was overfed, she was sleepy, she was cross ; moreover she had an indescribable air as of resenting the lagging close of an entertainment which had lost its point and its motive. There was patronage in her manner to the soldier ; there was even a hint of insolence. At last she said, with rude impatience : “ Well, minstrels stale, I find, like other sweetmeats, and there comes a time when we wonder why we cloyed ourselves with them. After all they only appear at the feast to prove how well we could have done without them.”

She had gorged herself at dessert on *marrons-glacés*, the old pig, and no doubt spoke feelingly. Yet there seemed a motive behind her ill-manners, too.

“ I have sung badly,” said Tiretta good-humouredly. “ I admit it.”

“ Eh bien ! ” said madame ; “ it does not matter in the least. You have done your best, and there is an end of it.”

She got up almost immediately, having delivered

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herself, though with a hurried manner, as if she doubted having gone too far, and, saying she had an appointment to keep and would be back in a minute, waddled out of the room.

"To sleep," whispered Isabella. "She will say to herself it is only to shut her eyes for a moment ; but it will be an hour."

"She will expect to find me gone when she returns," said Tiretta. "It was a very palpable hint."

He stood before the girl. She rose, and they looked at one another. Their hearts were somehow conscious of a vague foreboding. Then she moved, and made a sign to him to follow her to the window. Together they stepped out upon the balcony which overlooked the dreaming grounds.

It was a night for love and lovers. The moon burned large behind a film of mist, whose gauze just veiled the barren spaces of the dark, and charmed the sleeping trees, and shook within its tissue a spangled star or two, caught like fireflies in a web. Deep and shadowy below them lay the gardens, their far solitary sentinels two dim and grey colossi, Hercules and a satyr, whose hugeness alone had in past days saved them from the hands of the despoiler. Now, mere unsubstantial phantoms of the mist, they seemed to move and palpitate, as if some antique spirit in the night stirred in their stony veins. Here and there low down a light twinkled from a distant lodge or villa. Not a sound broke the utter stillness, save now and again the drowsy burr of a cricket, or

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the swish of a bat's wings as its shadow dipped and fled.

Silent in that breathing trance of things, the two stood together and drank in the beauty of the scene. Their pulses throbbed in unison to its sensuous appeal; they touched, and did not draw apart. Never before had he seemed so dear or she so fair in the other's eyes. He marvelled how he could ever have dared to lift his to this white miracle of girlhood—to dream of possessing it. As she stood near him, the sense of her proud young loveliness, so submissive to his love, of all that maiden treasure, and he the chosen master of its sweets and secrets, swelled in his heart until he scarce could bear its rapture. Mad thoughts were surging in his brain; he felt that he was losing command of himself, when suddenly she turned and spoke to him, a tense emotion in her voice :

“ Whatever happens, keep me in your heart.”

“ Isabel ! ” he breathed.

He held out his arms ; and she came instantly into them, and gave her lips to him, yielding herself utterly with just one sigh like a dreaming child's. All discretion, all good resolutions were forgotten in the passionate stress of that moment. He strained her to his breast with a fierce tyranny of possession ; and, her face lifted close to his, she whispered out her soul.

“ I shall not be false, even though—O, you will believe me, you will believe me, will you not ? ”

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"Hush!" he said. "What is there to fear?"

"I do not know," she sighed.

"Not the cryptic utterances of that rude old woman?"

"Your mind, too, is troubled. How can I be so close to you and not feel it. Bonbec, I am afraid of to-morrow."

"Come away with me then—here, to-night. I will get horses, and we will fly northwards—Isabel—to the unknown Eros! He gave us to one another—O, long long past in the beautiful gardens!—and I cannot live without you, beloved. Duty, honour, reason—throw them all to the wolves, so that our love alone remain to us."

She clasped her white arms about his neck, and with one soft hand caressed the hair from his forehead.

"Would it remain, dear my lord? Or would you not come to grudge the price you paid for it? And yet I love you so that I must risk it; but not till every other hope is gone."

"What hope, Isabel?"

"Ah! I do not know. But give me that plea of desperation for my pretext. Then, at last, if you call to me I will come."

"My princess; my true heart!"

"Not your princess, but your slave, Bonbec."

"My bird, then."

"O, yes, indeed—caught captive by a song, and trembling in your hand."

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Some noise, real or imaginary, startled them. He stirred ; but she would not let him go.

“ Yet one moment, beloved.”

“ Is it she returning ? ” he said. “ Well, let her find us. To die for you, Isabel—what a little thing it sounds beside my love ! Just to change this mortal suit for one more meet to await our nuptials in ! Yet how sweet the body clings to sweet ! ”

She struggled to free herself—to push him from her.

“ No, go,” she said. “ For pity’s sake, Bonbec ! O, you kill my heart with fear ! ”

“ One last kiss to comfort it.”

She tore herself from him, and he left her, going gaily through the empty room.

All that night he slept on roses, and all the following day he walked on air, his brain drugged with an exultant ecstasy which bore him far above the world of common thoughts and common apprehensions. Some instinct holding him from presuming too soon on a transcendent favour, he took horse and rode far into the country, returning only to the palace when night was falling. And presently, hardly knowing what to hope or what to fear from it, the summons reached him to attend the ladies in the *salle-d’audience*.

She was not there when he entered it ; only the old marquise, who rose with unwonted condescension and alacrity to greet him.

“ Ah, monsieur ! ” she said ; “ you are to con-

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gratulate us and yourself on the happy termination of your labours."

There was a sort of leery jubilation in her manner, sufficiently significant in the context of late forebodings. He looked at her stupidly.

"I do not understand," he said.

"What!" she cried. "You have not heard?"

"Heard what? I have been absent all day."

"And no advice has reached this amorous proxy from his indulgent principal? Eh well, monsieur! Wonders will never cease. It was for us to suppose that your periodical reports to the archduke were lately of such a favourable nature as to decide his Highness upon thus bringing matters to a head. And he has not informed you of his decision?"

"No, madame."

"That I, then, should be the first to enlighten you!"

"If you please, madame."

"It is only, monsieur, that her Imperial Majesty has despatched an ambassador to Parma to request for her son Joseph the hand of the Infanta. Such, you may consider if you like, is the fruit of your fond advocacy."

If he was staggered, he took the blow standing and like a soldier. No hint of what he felt must betray itself here. Even the old lady was half imposed upon by his manner.

"And her Highness herself?" he said, in a voice

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whose very desperation lent it coolness. "She is reconciled?"

"Hoity-toity!" cried the marquise. "A fine expression to apply to her."

"Else," said the chevalier, "why should *I* be here?"

"Well," answered madame: "that is true enough; but it was not diplomatic. Judged by the alacrity with which she obeyed her father's summons to court, I should say she was very well reconciled indeed."

"She has gone to Parma?"

"To receive the betrothal ring, monsieur. And so your task is ended. Henceforth, so long as you favour us with your company here, you are free to command your own time and your own inclinations. I can appreciate, believe me, the relief it will be to us all."

CHAPTER XVI

FAST BIND, FAST FIND

IT was a very impressive ceremony, this betrothal by ring—conventual, almost sacramental in its character. The ambassador's face had been flushed, his voice hushed, as he had presented this visible symbol of what was to him but something less than a hypostatic union, in which he himself modestly represented the third figure in the trinity. Whereafter, not as bride of Christ, but of Christ's more confident vicegerent, the heir of Austria, stood Isabella, pledged by token of the shining gem half slipping from her listless finger.

The words were spoken, the gage hung there in witness of their numbing actuality; she was left alone with the duke her father. Its first heat of transport had faded from Don Philip's cheek, and been succeeded by a rather rigid pallor, a look of hardness, both furtive and resentful. He uttered a little sardonic laugh—the most extreme expression of humour to be allowed himself by an Infant of Spain—and, pacing an aimless step or two, turned with a sudden violence on his child.

“ Well ? ” he barked.

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She shook her hand ; and the ring dropped from it—fell and bounded on the carpet.

“ It is too big for me,” she said piteously.

He stood transfixed a moment ; then forgot his dignity so far as to dive and recover the desecrated trinket.

“ God in heaven ! ” he began ; then checked himself and choked down his fury. “ A defect soon remedied,” he said, his voice quite hoarse.

“ But not my unfitness to wear it,” she answered. “ O, father, have pity on me ! ”

He went off like a madman, flinging back and forth the length of the room, and ended by stopping suddenly, his fists raised and clinched, to apostrophise space :

“ That our dearest hopes should have come to be realised—and for this ! That we should have devoted our love, our diplomacy, our peace of mind to the welfare of this monster of inconsistency and ingratitude ! ”

She cried out : “ O, no, no ! O, lord and father, not either ! ”

He came round, actually grinding his teeth :

“ I foresaw this. I read indifference and rebellion in your reception of his Highness’s plenipotentiary. But I tell you that your protests will be of no avail ; that we refuse to listen for an instant to any one of the fancied scruples which would deprive us, in the very fruition of our hopes, of the reward of so much disinterested self-sacrifice.”

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She let the storm pass, waiting with bowed head ; and presently, with an effort to command himself, he put a question to her :

“ What is your unfitness ? Speak ! ”

She looked up, then, the tears brimming in her eyes.

“ I do not think I was born for a throne,” she said—so movingly, that his heart should have been touched a little. “ Its grandeur frightens me.”

He waved that absurdity aside with *hauteur*. To scratch his pride was to find the cold, inflexible Spaniard.

“ You were born your father’s daughter,” he said, with a brevity which was final. Then he bent his eyes searchingly on her. “ Is there nothing else—no romantic folly of a young and foolish brain ? ”

For one moment, so temperate his tone had fallen, she had a mad impulse to tell him the truth, to throw herself upon his mercy and his love. But the thought of whom she might endanger thereby came to her, in time to stay the confession on her lips.

“ I am so young, father,” she said. “ If it is romance to want to keep my youth a little longer, and then to yield it to a humbler state than this, I am guilty of it, I suppose. But I do so love the simple things of life ; and I am not heroic in the least.”

“ What need of heroism here, you fool ? ”

“ O, much, much ! To throw away all that is dear to me to be an empress ! ”

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Still he searched her young innocence with that frowning stare. At length, stirring, and setting his lips grimly, he made to close the colloquy :

“ All folly and madness, as you must know. The step is taken ; it is irrevocable ; and you must reconcile yourself to the position imposed upon you.”

“ Imposed—imposed ! ” She wrung her pretty hands, and, writhing, pressed them to her mouth. “ O, that is it—no choice for me—to give myself away from all I love ! ”

She ran and threw herself at the duke’s feet, and caught at his hands, and wept to him :

“ In mercy, father, do not make me do this thing ! ”

He sought to free himself from her ; in his fury he even dragged her as she knelt, so that she almost fell before him.

“ I think you are mad,” he said.

“ Yes, mad,” she answered—“ I am mad. You must not wed a mad woman to an emperor’s son.”

He was frightened a little over the vehemence of her despair. Whatever was to account for it, it was not to be laid, it seemed, by coercion. He must try other means, a different appeal. If a startled suspicion had risen in his heart, he must not betray it ; his pride, indeed, prevented him. He passed a hand across his forehead, and forced himself to address her in calmer tones.

“ Come,” he said ; “ control yourself, and try to be reasonable. Why, consider, my little Isabelita, what it is you ask of me—how utterly wild and

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impossible. You have not been ignorant of our plans for you, or of the steps by which they have reached at last this triumphant consummation. And all this time you have shown no sign of revolt, of anything but a tacit conforming to our wishes. What has suddenly changed you?" His face darkened in spite of himself.

"I think," she said, "there are no slaves in all the world like princesses. It is not for me, as with the free and happy, to say to my father, 'I have tried with all my heart because you desired it, and yet I cannot, and I know it would be wrong to give myself rather with aversion than with regard.' It is enough with more fortunate girls to say 'I do not love him.' But what does that avail with us?"

"Aversion!"—he breathed the word in deep scorn—"when you have not even met him?"

"O, father! you have said it. I have not even met him."

"What, then?" He burst out again, in spite of all his efforts at self-control. "Have you no sense of decency—of what your rank demands of you? There should be loftier motives than mere personal feeling behind these great alliances. But I will hear no more. My patience is exhausted."

"I will not marry him."

He stared at her in amazement.

"Sullen and obdurate!" he said. "You will not? We will see. O, I knew very well you had started with an insane prejudice—the mere peevish

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humour of an unreasonable child. But, beware ! Kingdoms are not to be bandied on such terms of spoilt caprice. What or who has instigated you to this rebellion, I say ? If any has abused his trust to do so, let him look well to the consequences of his daring."

She was scared in her turn now—so scared, that her heart for an instant seemed to stop.

" I am a woman, father," she said faintly ; " why should you look for anything beyond a woman's natural repugnance to being pledged against her choice or will ? "

He did not answer for a minute ; and then in a softened, more persuasive tone he said :

" A woman, child ? To be sure ; and I had thought it enough to appeal to the woman in you ; the daughter first of all. How we had laboured for this alliance, prayed for it, rejoiced at last in its reality—ah, *mon Dieu*, you cannot know ! And yet you should know. It has been the hope of our maturity ; our comfort and solace in our days of bitter trial. It was to set us right with the world, to relieve us of our embarrassments, to enable us to do justice at last to the many poor souls long devoted to our fortunes. And with you it rested to be the almoner to all these pathetic needs."

" Father—no ! You kill me with your words ! "

" Kill you ? Ah, child, what if it kill your mother, in the frail state she is in, to learn of this final blow to her hopes ? "

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She had thrown her arms, as she knelt, across a chair, and now laid her face on them, abandoned to hopeless grief.

"Am I to speak her death-sentence then?" asked the duke, in a broken whisper.

Her face still hidden, she held out her poor left hand. Understanding, he slipped the ring upon the quivering finger, and, wise in the resolve to let well alone, went softly from the room, and left her to her despair.

In the corridor outside he came upon M. la Coque, who scanned his agitated face with a furtive curiosity. The duke motioned his favourite to follow him, and led the way into his private closet, where he threw himself into a chair, and began to fan his brow exhaustedly with his handkerchief.

"Charlot," he said presently, looking up from under languid lids: "is the door shut?"

"It is fast, monseigneur."

The duke signed to him to come nearer.

"You were witness of her reception of the pledge?"

"Of the Infanta's?"

"Now who else? The Infanta's, of course. Well, how did it strike you?"

"That mademoiselle, perhaps, made a little light of the gift."

The duke dabbed his forehead, and sat up suddenly, with a sigh.

"Charlot?"

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“ Your Highness ? ”

“ What was that you once hinted to me about someone’s art with a little a ? ”

“ Your Highness thought fit at the time—very properly, I am sure—to reprove me for what was merely an idle speculation.”

“ Very likely. You declined to state your authority, if I remember. Do you still ? ”

“ That must be conditional.”

“ On what ? ”

“ On your condonation of a certain liaison.”

“ Well, well. Who is the other party to it, Charlot ? ”

“ I must crave your Highness’s absolution.”

“ You have it, coquin.”

“ It is Fanchette Becquet, then—the Infanta’s first femme de confiance.”

“ Ah, rogue ! ” The duke frowned—then sighed again. “ That is to bring corruption very near the fount of innocence.”

“ Not corruption, monsieur, but salvation. If I have sacrificed myself to serve your Highness——”

“ O—la—la ! O to be sure ! You are a very disinterested scamp. But that sort of sacrifice will never get you into heaven. And what was innocence doing to risk its salvation, my friend ? ”

“ Has your Highness formed no opinion ? ”

The duke shrugged his shoulders, pettishly, wearifully.

“ You smile, and hint, and shuffle round the

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truth, as if you would seek to have me understand it without compromise to yourself. Why the devil can't you speak out ? ”

“ What encouragement have I, when my motives are misconstrued into spite and jealousy ? I was told once how this envious spirit of mine might get me into trouble. With deference, monseigneur, I think you sometimes hardly recognise your true friends.”

“ Maybe, Charlot ; and maybe I did you wrong. Only, if you are one and the best of them, as I do now incline to believe, in honesty speak out and prove it. Be candid as the day : I bid you ; I beg you, Charlot my friend.”

“ Well, then, I start on this : you sneer at my disinterestedness, as illustrated by this little affaire ; but I will tell you I have a true passion for this girl ; I desire to monopolise her affections ; and yet I have bidden her so to contrive as that she shall fall under suspicion of an intrigue with the chevalier Tiretta.”

“ O, just under suspicion ? That will not harm you.”

“ Monseigneur well knows that what is begun in play will often end in earnest. I risk that—and why ? Out of devotion to your interests. Here is a case—which I will put so far specifically. A lover sends a friend to plead his cause for him—a mad thing to do, and the madder the more persuasive the friend. We know the proper advocate lives in his part ; the cause is just worth him and

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no more ; if he wins he takes the credit—and the fees. But supposing there are those among us who, having recognised the danger, are decided that the advocate must be foiled in his design at whatever cost. There is nothing for us then but so to brand his character that he will be forced to withdraw prematurely from the case. Your Highness smokes me ? ”

“ Par exemple. That is where your little cocotte comes in.”

“ That is where Fanchette comes in—and with what result as regards the subject of the real intrigue ? Why that she learns at last with indignation that what is offered her is but the reversion of a passion she believed so single to herself ; that a thirst she deemed divine is content to slake itself in the common ditch——”

“ You flatter your Fanchette and your own taste, Charlot——”

“ That, in short, her god of gold is revealed a god of brass, I thank your Highness. So this M. Tiretta, if I have judged aright, falls from his estate of perfection. After all, a woman wears a lover as she does a robe—exclusively, that is to say ; a thing for her sole possession. Fashions grow out of fashion when the lesser ape them.”

The duke, meditating darkly awhile, rose from his chair, and went pacing frowningly to and fro.

“ So,” said he, stopping suddenly in his walk, “ I am to understand that you have taken these

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means on your own responsibility, and that you consider yourself justified in taking them. Why ? ”

“ Because, in doing so, I believe myself to be acting as your Highness’s true friend.”

“ But why, man, why ? In what lies your justification ? That is what I want to know.”

“ In my little friend’s reports.”

“ Of an intrigue ? ”

“ Of an intrigue in the making, at least.”

“ And now nipped in the bud ? ”

“ If you authorise the process.”

“ She knows nothing as yet of this amiable scheme to disenchant her ? ”

“ Nothing. But the ground is all prepared.”

“ You do not, sir, imply for a moment that my daughter——”

“ Mademoiselle is as guiltless as the angels. I stake my soul on it.”

“ I should have preferred something of more value. But let that pass.”

“ You approve the scheme, then ? ”

“ If necessary. But I trust that folly is ended ; that all will be well henceforth. Nevertheless I applaud your true vigilance, my friend.”

“ Upon my conscience, monseigneur, I think you should. Admit that I have manœuvred well both to circumvent scandal, and to make his own treachery recoil on the head of the betrayer.”

“ That I could hold that forfeit. But the charge is too shadowy ; and he is the archduke’s protégé.

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Still, the time may come. Now, the man must be got rid of—and without delay.”

“ You will see to that, I think.”

“ And in the meanwhile the Infanta remains with us, here at Parma.”

“ Under watch, if I might suggest.”

“ Charlot ? ”

“ Your Highness ? ”

“ I think, perhaps, it would be as well to put your scheme at once to the proof.”

“ I will instruct Fanchette forthwith, sir.”

“ Yes, that is right. It will, perhaps, relieve the situation.”

His mind cleared, he hummed a little stave, and turned roguishly on the other :

“ I hope you will not find that the little cocotte, like your other advocate, has accommodated herself too realistically to her part. That were a cursed return for your trust in her.”

“ I took it into the reckoning, sir. If she has, my own with her will come as soon as she has ceased to be of use, that is all.”

“ O, shocking, shocking ! Come, go call la Roque, and we will forget all this tedious stuff over a game at ombre.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE LOST PRESENCE

IT is a pathetic paradox that we never truly acquire anything until we have lost it. To possess rightly what is ours we must be deprived of it, must come to view it down the perspectives of the past and gone, to enable us to get its real proportions into focus. That would seem to imply that, as the mystics teach us, matter is the illusion and imagination the reality, since loss opens our mental vision to a thousand truths, to which while possessing them we were blind. The miser, robbed and pauperised, realises too late the countless opportunities for happiness he has forgone ; the desolated lover knows at last the devotion which risked death to pleasure him, rather than deny to the lesser faith that proof which, to its own, more strong and pure, was inessential. So it often is that to die is to live for the first time as one's true self, even in the hearts of those who cherished us.

Ah, death, who clears the vision ; in whom all revealed truths corradiate—give us back the child, the friend, the lover, whose worth we never really estimated until you opened our eyes to all that it had meant to us. The qualities we were impatient

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of because we could not understand ; the motives we misinterpreted ; even the small vitalities that often worried us, got in our way, seemed importunate and tiresome—what would we not give at last to hear again one tone of the insistent voice, to feel again one touch of the restless hands, whose very tyranny expressed a fearless confidence in the love that would not see. But it may not be ; our knowledge comes in loss ; and were these to be restored to us, the veil of flesh would again close in and blind our vision to their truth.

That lost presence ! If with all our memory of its faults it can figure so ineffably dear to us, be so comprehended at last for its lovely indispensability, how must it live in a heart which has never learned to associate anything with it but the gentlest perfection of form and nature. So the widowed heart of Tiretta regarded its deprivation. With him the larger knowledge was but as the knowledge of a transfiguration from Love the saint to Love the goddess.

At first he could not realise that she was gone—even from the house that her voice and light step had made so beautiful. That she could have gone out of his life would have seemed a desolation too monstrous for belief. And yet he had known throughout on what a precarious tenure he held his lease of light, and how wilfully, how infatuatedly he had blinded his soul to its impermanence.

It could not but be blinded still, while the glamour

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of that last meeting hung in his brain like an intoxicating incense. In his ecstasy of sure possession there was no room at the moment for doubts and apprehensions. It was only when he came fully to grasp the fact that, in the official view, he was wholly done with her, that she had been taken from him like a patient cured, and that no reason existed in the world why they should ever meet again, that a sense of his own incredible position seemed to break in upon him. She was not gone for a day, a week, a month; she was gone, so far as their intimacy was concerned, for ever. Henceforth her august and his obscure destinies separated, to flow continually wider apart; no road of his conceivably led to Parma, where she was established not again to return.

Not to return! He had to grip himself to realise that stupendous fact, to get at last on terms with the conscience he had so long eluded. And then, flowing, flowing in from that outer darkness to which it had been relegated, came the deadly spirit of guilt and remorse; and he awoke to blank amazement of his dream, and whither it had brought him.

Now he had to stand up, a desperate creature, and parley with his soul. What was he going to do in this crisis of his affairs? The just, the expiatory thing, since, mercifully, it might be said, heaven had snatched him from his self-delusion in time to make atonement possible? If hitherto the odds

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against him had been morally overwhelming, here was the psychologic moment of respite, the breathing, the renewing time, when he could still withdraw with some honour to himself. And so, what of her, sacrificed in her innocent trust, like piteous Iphigenia, to appease the anger of the gods? No, it was unthinkable; he was not hero or coward enough to condemn his own soul to that renunciation, let the gods visit his weakness on his head as they would. To go; to let her believe him faithless, spiritless, believe his love, to which she leaned in wistful confidence, a thing of straw? He could not do it, not though reason pointed to it as the wise and noble course. What had he to do with reason, whose bliss had been in defying it? He had sinned to his friend already beyond redemption; would it mend his salvation to play the traitor to his love?

O, his love—his beautiful love! If it had been madness before to relinquish that dream, how much more impossible was it now, when loss had made of it an immortal ecstasy, had transported it from earth to heaven, had exalted its little Madonna of the white feet to those starry heights where no breath of gross desire might reach her. Now she belonged to him tenfold by right of that immaculateness; he was jealous of her virgin fame, since she was enthroned there by his will—a tender thing, no longer for the rough wounding of man's passion. Let her thus dwell for ever in the skies, serene and chaste and adorable. The world was free to kneel with him and

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worship ; though her chosen one, he would demand no closer privilege for himself.

But they would not let it be ; they had haled her from her heaven, meaning to despoil her ; and what alternative had he then but to claim her bodily for his own ? Friendship, good faith, policy—what were all these as against his age-long title, the wild mystic compact made in those far green gardens ? That was the older, the more binding troth, of which, when he accepted his credentials from the archduke, he had guessed nothing. Now, if honour bound him, it was there. He could not help it if the humour of the thing jumped with his inclination.

He would recognise all this sometimes for the casuistry it was ; but mostly, so strangely was the mystic in him blended with the rationalist, it would possess his mind with all the force of an actual memory. But it mattered little, after all, with what he chose to salve his conscience, since, angry or half-healed, he found no solution in it of his difficulties.

Those were to know what to do, now the inevitable, against which he had made no provision, was upon him. He had sung like the improvident grasshopper, and the winter of his rapture found him unprepared. Was it still possible they might communicate, and arrange some plan of action ? And, if so, what plan ? At the least it must be a mad and a desperate one, staking their all on the cast, hopeless from the first of compromise. Yet he was

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ready, if she was brave. He must learn that ; must force the knowledge somehow. Or would she find means to provide him with it unasked ? Not for one moment would he believe in the reality of her asserted reconciliation to her doom. He was as sure of her true heart as he was of his own imperishable constancy. Yet what to do ?

He did nothing. As, I opine, all but the resourceful heroes of romance would do under like circumstances, so did he—he temporised.

He could not bring himself to believe, indeed, that their separation was final. He was always in the hope that, the formal betrothal achieved, she would be allowed to return to Colorno ; and he was doggedly resolved, pending such blissful restoration, not only to outstay his welcome, but to ignore the broadest and least delicate hints, of which the marquise was not sparing, that he might with advantage to everyone be gone.

His amiable persistency even had its effect at length on the rude old lady ; especially when, for diplomacy's sake, he brought the persuasion of his voice to bear upon her still responsive susceptibilities. The suggestion that, the main theme withdrawn, he could find even freer inspiration for his songs in her ripe understanding came so to captivate her that in the end, from suffering his flatteries, she quite coveted them—and, finally, she made love to him.

Thereat, a little alarmed, he drew back ; and

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perhaps so obviously as to precipitate his own downfall. But of that in a moment.

In the meanwhile he spent the most of his days in wandering about the now desolate grounds, his heart a prey to vain longings and vainer expectations. No word or sign came in all this time to solace or decide him ; he walked, the very spirit of loneliness and brooding melancholy, a being most pathetically haunted.

Once he went to Aquaviva's gardens ; and talked graciously with the little Bissy because he was a pet of hers ; and spent a sweet sad hour in the orange grove, absorbed in one delirious memory. But mostly he frequented the palace walks, retasting unforgettable delights. He could have kissed her lilies one by one on their open mouths ; to stand approximately in her footprints was a fatuous joy to him ; often he stole to her vacant windows, and committed his soul to their sweet inaccessible mysteries.

The children he rather avoided. They worried him with their unfeeling prattle. Yet still he lingered on. It could not last much longer ; and he knew it could not. But what was to be the end ?

He never doubted her love—not for one instant. He pictured her, like himself, waiting, waiting for the deliverance that would not come, for the reunion that hard fate debarred them. She would yield herself to him, she had said, when hope was gone ; he had but to call and she would fly to hide herself

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in his breast. So it was hope that parted them ;
yet how was he to banish hope and still regain her ?
It was upon hope he lived.

Once he wove this sorrowful exaltation of his into
a rhapsody of love and loss, the sense of which may
be rendered in the following lines :

- “ Once for a thousand years ’twas Spring ;
 Love reigned, and Death stood still ;
The world paused at its burgeoning
 Of may and daffodil.
- “ Like buds from spiring lilies thrown,
 Time blossomed over Time ;
It seemed, ere yet its sweets were blown,
 That earth to heaven would climb—
- “ It seemed, all wrath, all hate were fled,
 And sole bright sense remained ;
That something evil had been sped,
 And some new knowledge gained.
- “ Then no fruits were, but endless bliss
 Of Love that knew no sting,
And laughed him on from kiss to kiss,
 Like bees a’honeying.
- “ The rains were gone, the skies were blue,
 Nor any cloud had birth
Save but to drop a gentle dew
 Like balm upon the earth.
- “ Nor grief nor grievance ere could be
 In fields so fair bedight ;
And, above, the fields of eternity
 Soft blossomed through the night.
- “ And there the moon, the witch of dreams,
 Her web of slumber wrought,
Till in its soft and silken beams
 Ten thousand stars were caught.

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“ And there the moon with shining eyes
Her silken web prepared,
To catch the stars like fireflies,
And kiss them, being snared.

“ O ! sweet it was in woods and bowers,
And no fear to conceive ;
But meal of honey gave the flowers
And dew the cups of eve.

“ O ! sweet it was. O ! sweet it was.
No sweeter could befall,
While love the end was and the cause—
God knows what changed it all !

“ A kiss too much, too full a sigh—
The vessel brimméd o’er ;
And the creaking wain of Destiny
Moved onwards as before.”

And so he lingered on amidst the golden ruins of his paradise, wondering, as if his brain were stupefied, over what he had done to bring it thus in a moment about his ears.

He was not permitted to wonder long. Whether it were that she soon realised the hollowness of his attentions to herself ; or the real peril of his continued presence in the neighbourhood ; or, which is most probable, that she was wearied with the whole business, the marquise took steps to make his further stay in the palace impossible to him. Once resolved, she went about the business after her uncompromising fashion. She opened upon him one night without relevance or preface :

“ Like Cupid, monsieur, you are everyone’s match-maker, it seems, and nobody’s gallant. And yet sometimes I wonder.”

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“ Over what, madame ? ”

“ Why as to there being possibly a subtler purpose in your advocacy than you let appear.”

“ What purpose, for example ? ”

“ Call it the purpose of the first-fruits, such as it is said our provincial monseigneurs claim on unions to which they give their blessing.”

He drew back as if he had received a blow in the face. But she went on with perfect serenity :

“ There was, for instance, that little volage Fanchette—now in Parma with her mistress—whom you made happy with her gentleman.”

“ *I* made happy ? ”

“ Did you not ? Or was it only that, having taken your fee, the case resolved itself without your help ? ”

He rose from his chair, as pale and grim as death.

“ What purpose can you have in thus insulting me ? ” he said.

She gave a high little laugh, quite placid.

“ Insult ! Such as you ! O, I can assure you, monsieur, your methods have not failed to interest us. You have been very discreet ; but walls have eyes as well as ears. Do not think I blame you for insisting on your price ; such devotion deserves to be paid in kind.”

“ You lie,” he said, quite quietly now. “ I have only that to say.”

“ Eh ! ” she cried. “ It was not for that, then, that you intrigued with her ? Or was it possibly

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that you thought to use the girl as stepping-stone to higher things ? ”

His amazement showed in his face.

“ I have neither used nor abused her,” he said. “ I know nothing whatever of her affairs of the heart. It is a base and wicked slander, whoever uttered it. I say so much and no more, because my honour demands it. You will permit me to withdraw, madame. I quit the palace to-night.”

“ That is as you please,” she answered, unruffled ; and he left her.

He had no alternative, his raging heart assured him. He must go at once, whatever his departure might portend to his hopes. But to stay on here thus vilified, thus enlightened, was impossible. O, into what foul passes had his sin allured him ! And that they could have been existing all this time, unsuspected by him, like filthy slums environing the places which her very footsteps had made holy ! The thought of them, of himself in such connection, was a profanation to her memory. His soul cried out to him to claim and bear her away, to a purer atmosphere, to a lovelier knowledge—into the white grave mysteries of the North.

Whither first ? As he halted a moment, undecided, a palace functionary pursued him with a despatch. He opened it and read. It was from the archduke, recalling him peremptorily to Vienna.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN INTERVIEW

"I WOULD have laid down my life for my friend : my friend asked of me a harder thing."

He stood before the prince, his head erect, his hand motionless upon his sword hilt. Joseph, sitting, as quietly, in the chair he had pushed back from the table, regarded him steadily, dispassionately—even, at last, with an odd touch of pity in his expression. The season was early August ; the place, a private cabinet in the old imperial palace called the Burg.

"So much I have inferred," said the young archduke, his voice not cold but even, "from the Duke of Parma's recent advices to me recommending your recall. I had not known before, Tiretta, that a soldier looked upon the vindication of his honour as so difficult a task."

He noted, with an observant interest, the spasm that twitched the set features at his words. He was in all things curious and analytical.

"I have deserved this," was the low answer. "Stab, sir, and turn your creese in the wound."

"You do me an injustice," said Joseph calmly. "It is to the scalpel, not the sword, that I would have

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you reveal yourself. If I probe, I probe for instruction. The soldier's code, for instance—is it not a strict one? What harder thing did I ask of you than to obey orders? I seek simply for information."

"No need to. I am a villain."

"Tut-tut, my friend! That is merely to beg the question. You know my views very well. A man is not to be summed up in that convenient fashion. Is it, for instance, the assertion of a villain that he would sacrifice his life for his friend?"

"Would to God I could do it, and so cut the knot!"

The eyes, watchful, inquisitive, in the pale narrow young face, canvassed the speaker curiously.

"Well," said their owner at length: "will you not answer my question?"

"You ask me, sir, what was peculiarly hard to me, a soldier, in that mere call to obedience? Nothing, I answer. That you could send me into the fight, having first broken my sword in its scabbard—that was the hard thing."

The prince seemed to ponder a little, sitting without movement, save for a slight corrugation of his brows.

"No, I do not understand," he said presently. "You would seem to imply that I wilfully dedicated you to destruction."

"Wilfully, yes. I do not say consciously."

"Can will be unconscious of itself?"

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“ In princes, sir, because no one dreams of questioning it in them. There can be no conscious force without conscious resistance.”

The young philosopher considered again, as appraising a plausible theory.

“ Very well,” he said. “ Then, to return from the abstract to the particular, what is represented in fact by this symbol of the broken sword ? ”

“ My broken honour, sir, for which you were responsible.”

“ No, you must explain.”

“ What—have you forgotten the incident at the ford, from which all this luckless mission derived ? To send a convicted pander to sing his employer’s praises ! God in heaven ! Who but a prince could have failed to foresee the end ? ”

“ Well, sir—continue. I begin, I think, to perceive.”

“ Not justly, sir, nor the whole. I sang your praises ; I was loyal to my friendship and my humiliating task. Never doubt that for one instant. But what was the force of an advocacy so recommended ? What any but a prince might have foretold. I was scorned, I was repudiated, and rightly, because my honour was in question ; and that I could not endure. It was above all things dear to me, and I wrought to exculpate it. I could not have gained a hearing without—and that is my excuse and my crime.”

He ended, breathing deeply. Still the unwinking

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eyes canvassed him, and without emotion, it seemed.

“ You sought to convince her of your honour ? ”

“ I had no alternative.”

“ By converting it, so vindicated, to a dishonourable purpose ? ”

“ I never ceased to extol your Highness’s noble qualities—no, not to the end.”

“ The end ! ”

For the first time some emotion showed itself in Joseph’s face. He started, as if he would rise ; but leaned back again, resolute to control himself.

“ You may question my honour, sir,” said Tiretta. “ In the name of God, leave hers unsullied by a thought.”

Steadfastly, for some moments, the two regarded one another ; then Joseph rose from his chair, and, walking to a window, stood looking out upon an inner court of the palace which it commanded. Presently, without turning, he spoke :

“ You are very severe on princes, my friend ; yet it seems they can be guileless in their trusts.”

“ If, sir, by guileless you mean despotic, they are the most trusting souls on earth. So might we all be, if a wish with us overruled, without question, every possible or impossible objection. How can princes enter into common human feelings when they have had no least experience of them ? To feel, one must suffer and be denied.”

“ Do I not feel ? I think I could convince you.”

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"You feel for yourself, sir—I do not doubt it—in this disillusionment about one you had thought to be your true friend and servant."

"I feel for you, Tiretta."

He had turned as he spoke, and now came forward, until he stood face to face with the man who had wronged him. There was a look in his eyes strangely like compassion.

"Truly I can feel for you," he said—"as for anyone who lets his heart go out towards the unattainable."

A shadow seemed to fall upon the soldier's face.

"So speaks the prince," he said—"generous and fine-minded; but still the prince. Can a prince be slave to love, sir?"

"History would seem to say so."

"Ah! He may rule everything else, but not that: he cannot rule what, in common with all men, he is subject to. A prince in love is just a man in love. He, too, may suffer the unattainable."

For some moments the archduke stood silent; then, slightly nodding his head, made answer:

"True, Tiretta—that is quite true. I cannot command love. I might possess, and murder to possess its form: still not to me but to the shadow of the dead would belong all that was worth possessing in it. Have you deserved death? I do not know. I only know I would not have the thing I seek made unattainable; and that would it become, were I to

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kill you. Yet what to do? Tell me, my friend, for I am in your hands."

"In mine!"

Emotion, sudden and startled, shook the inflexible voice.

"Tiretta!"

The young prince put a hand, quite movingly and unexpectedly, on his erst-favourite's shoulder. The action, generous and manly, spoke the real heart under all its philosophic veneer.

"Admit," said Joseph: "have you not a little exaggerated the cause in order to justify the end? The name you gave yourself——"

"It was given me, sir, by implication."

"By whom or what? The sweetest and most innocent lips in the world? You wrong them, I am sure, even more than you do yourself or me. But the fault was mine, you say; yet I had always honestly thought you insusceptible to such emotions—a dreamer, a wooer of abstractions. Well, I was mistaken, it seems. Your strength was unequal to the task my faith in it imposed on you. Which of us was most to blame—I in directing, you in accepting? What need to quarrel about that now? We have made a botch of it between us, and the thing for us to discuss is how best to mend a lamentable case. Will you not tell me the whole truth, Tiretta, my friend?"

"Before God, I will." The man was profoundly touched.

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“ Then, say, are you to her what she is to you ? ”

“ That were impossible.”

“ Nay, you equivocate.”

“ On my soul, then, I believe that, heaven helping us, she would give me her hand to-morrow.”

A slight tremor seemed to take the archduke's features. He stood back, quitting his hold on the other. A minute's tense silence ensued.

“ Well,” he said at length, just repressing a sigh.

“ I repeat I am in your hands.”

Again, impulsively, he advanced and renewed his caressing touch.

“ There can be no issue but one. You know it, Tiretta—man, you know it. We are all in the bonds of fate, and helpless. Now, listen and believe me. If it were possible, I would yield her to you. It is not possible. Then would you condemn your friend to a loveless match ? ”

“ What would you have me do ? ”

His voice was quite wrung and broken.

“ I would have you,” said Joseph, “ atone, in the only way you can, the wrong you have done, not to me but to her.”

“ I am to go—never to see her again—to leave her believing me faithless ? ”

“ Better a faithless lover than a faithless wife. So only can you heal the wound you have inflicted. For her sake, Tiretta.”

“ Why do you not call in your guards, and have me silenced for ever ? I will make no resistance.”

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“ Because I am human, though a prince, Tiretta.”

For a while, desperate, still mutinous, the man's torn soul fought out its tragedy of renunciation. And at last impulsively surrendered. With bowed head, he spoke the words :

“ You have a noble mind, sir. If you will not retaliate on me as you might, death is always somewhere waiting for the soldier. I will go do what I may to seek an honourable one. And so heaven forgive me and requite your Highness ! ”

He took the gracious young hand in his, put his lips to it, and, turning, left the room, walking with blinded eyes and upright head, like a prisoner who passes from the dock to the condemned cell.

CHAPTER XIX

“ MARIANA ”

THE real tragedy of separation is not for the banished lover ; it is for the desolate home-keeper, who knows no distractions of change and movement to solace her aching heart. He, at least, has his freedom, his new interests ; she, none but the old, grown now so flat and unprofitable since the glorifying light was once flashed upon them and withdrawn. How darker than darkness looks a room when the lamp is blown out ; how stale and charmless seems life the morning after the play ; how remote from the witching darling of last night's masque appears this love-sick Chloe, yawning biliously over her untouched breakfast plate ! Perhaps Strephon this morning also looks a little “ off colour ” and feels a little sick ; but he has the imperative duties of office to call him to a sane resumption of life's prose, and no doubt by lunch time he has earned himself a vigorous appetite, no less hearty for the sentiment which has intervened between his chop of yesterday and his curried prawns of to-day.

But, for poor stay-at-home Chloe, some zest has gone for ever from the old placid satisfactions ; she cannot recover at their past valuation the humdrum routine of things ; she has seen the commonplace

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transformed, and henceforth life to her, to be life, must reveal itself on a higher plane. So she still toys with her food at luncheon, and again at dinner, and sighs over the insufferable dreariness and monotony of that social existence which once made her full content.

“ What made the assembly shine ? ” O, what, indeed, poor Isabel, since your days have fallen into so sad a melancholy, and the light has fled from your haunted eyes ? “ Because Lorenzo came not ? ” Alas he did not come, he did not speak ; and to what was life reduced, lacking his voice and presence. So, thinking the same thought of unaccountable neglect, these divided lovers mourned apart. Sometimes in her heart she would upbraid him, calling him false and cruel ; but more often she accused herself, saying she had been his ruin, his evil genius, and again bemoaning her own fatal weakness in not flying with him when he had bidden her. Yet, granted they were well parted, he might have salved her anguish with something kinder than this killing silence. Had he so soon forgotten her—forgotten how she had bidden him call to her, when all hope was gone, and she would fly to him ? No, she could not, she would not believe it. It was only that he did not realise how cruelly souls condemned to pining inaction might suffer. Out in the free air it was so hard to enter into the feelings of the dull prisoner hidden from one’s ken. She made every loving excuse for him ; and still, poor thing, she

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hungered for a sign, and, hungering, trembled at the thought of her own wickedness.

For was she not a plighted bride—enslaved by token of the hateful golden fetter clasping her finger? She wore it in public, to the duke her father's vacuous content; but at night she would fling it from her, and kneel to her basil, and kiss its perfumed leaves, and moan out her passionate penitence for even that show of disloyalty. She had brought this, her treasure of treasures, with her, and it was her one comfort and reassurance in all the grievous time.

One day it came to her, did he know of the formal betrothal? Perhaps he had looked to her love's high courage to resist to the last, and, learning the mortal truth, how at the first onset she had failed him, had renounced so frail an ally. O, in that case, how could she let him know that her heart had never once wavered in its fidelity to him—let him know that, whatever bitter fate forced their steps apart, she was his, in everything but seeming, to all eternity?

Poor child; she was always more loving than wilful—no forceful heroine to command her own destiny. She waited for the call, only bewildered as to what to do to evoke it. She could obey, but she could not initiate. Perhaps, at first, she had hoped, like that other, that, the ceremony once achieved, she would be allowed to return to Colorno. If so, it did not take long to disillusion her. At the first hint of such a wish the duke, angrily suspicious, half revealed himself:

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“ Understand, your salad days are over, and for ever. Henceforth you await here the completion of the contract which is to make you woman out of child. All romantic follies of the past must be forgotten. You renounced them, in all faith and honour, when you accepted his Highness’s token from my hands.”

She shrank back, as if detected in her guilt ; and Don Philip continued :

“ I look to you not to force me into some very drastic measures to cut this trouble at its root. Think well of what I say, for much concerning another welfare than yours depends on it.”

He had found the way to silence her. She could not misread the hint, or blind herself to the understanding which lay behind it. *His* life lay at the mercy of her conduct. If she would preserve it, she must assume a placid resignation, seem to repudiate the very suggestion of any *arrière pensée* in her proposal.

The shock was stunning, but, having surmounted it, she bent herself with piteous eagerness to play the deceiver’s part. Her fear went on tiptoe ; she smiled and sang in the duke’s presence, so that it was pathetic to see her—a thing to turn one’s eyes from. He may have approved the effort ; yet in truth she could not so suffer without betraying a sign. To clinch the matter, he decided to play, in collusion with another, his reserve card.

One day, the Infanta being present, his Highness

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began, on some pre-arranged provocation, to banter La Coque upon his former jealousy of a rival musician.

"Admit he sang divinely," he said.

"In truth, monseigneur, I saw but little divinity in the man."

"O, you would not, chirruping with your nose to the ground!"

"That's as it may be. I fear no test, before an impartial judge."

"What; you would back yourself in a competition of voices?"

"Aye, and of improvisation—this day, this moment, if you will. Let M. Tiretta be summoned, and give us both a fair hearing."

"Coquin, you dare the challenge, knowing he is gone."

"On my faith, no, sir. I believed him at Colorno. Whither is he vanished?"

"To the devil—to Vienna—to anywhere, for what I care, so he remains to shock our sense of decorum no longer. Truth is the rascal claimed too many of the prerogatives of the troubadour—free sport among the petticoats for one. The scandal grew notorious. There was a wench, for instance—but ware, bully-boy! I tread on dangerous ground."

"My ground, sir?"

"How he threatens us with his brow! Spare us, good Charlot—I but quote the common report. Yet admit the fellow had an endearing way with him."

"Curse him!"

La Coque was half caught in the snare of his own setting. He stood glowering sulkily, while Don Philip, with a little stealthy sidelong glance at his daughter, turned with a snigger to some other of his suite.

A flush of colour to her cheek ; a just perceptible lift of the lip—the duke was scarce intelligent enough to read the signs.

That they could think her capable of being trapped by such a shallow artifice ! Her heart swelled in her breast over the base wrong to him, the despicable meanness to herself. O, how fine and proud he appeared by contrast with these ignoble minds, how remote from them in his living intensity, his spiritual dignity ! She would not even condescend to defend him in thought against a slander so gross and obvious. Its effect was to confirm her tenfold in her faith.

“ She is pricked,” thought the duke. “ We may leave the poison to work.”

But the poison was not as he surmised : it was shame, not for the slandered but the slanderer, that burnt in her veins. Her father ! That he could have debased himself to such methods ! All in a moment he seemed revealed to her for what he was, a prince with a clown’s heart, a whited sepulchre, behind the mask of elegance a soul like a shrivelled kernel, without life or savour. She turned from him, in a very sickness of repulsion.

But that night, as Fanchette was preparing her

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for bed, she rose suddenly from her chair, and, turning upon the maid, clasped her convulsively by the arms.

“ Tell me of him, or I shall die,” she said.

The girl for the moment was completely taken aback. She did not know what to answer, and could only stare and gasp. The feverish clutch closed more urgently upon her.

“ I have no friend but you in all the world, Fanchette. Have I not been kind to you? O, be kind to me and tell me! You know very well—you have always known, I think. Forgive me if I pretended not to understand you. I tried so long to fight against it; and I could not—and my heart is breaking.”

Startled, unnerved as she was, Fanchette could not but be touched by that piteous appeal.

“ Hush!” she said. “ What do you want to know? There, sit upon this couch, and speak low, while I kneel to you. So. Now, tell me, are you always thinking of him?”

“ Always, always, Fanchette—all the weary day and night. Why does he not send me one least little message?”

“ It is said he is gone to Vienna.”

“ O, cruel!”

“ Would you kill him with your rashness? Do you not know he is suspected?”

“ Fanchette!—my God! Tell him to keep away. You must—you can find means.”

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“ What is the good, when by your every look and act you betray him.”

“ I will not—O, I will not ! But to hear him so slandered and maligned—it is hard to suffer and to smile.”

“ Do they slander him—are you sure ? ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ O, nothing ! ” She gave a little affected laugh. She was beginning to consider her part. “ Only it does not do with us to idealise our fancies too much.”

She failed, for all her effort, to meet the inquisition of the true grief-stricken eyes.

“ Fanchette ! ”

“ O, we know how gossip is to be discounted. For myself, at least, I never took him seriously.”

“ In what ? ”

“ It is only natural to propitiate the maid if you would come at the mistress.”

“ Did he make love to *you* ? ”

“ O, that is too definite a term ! He said enough to put me on my guard against him—that is all.”

“ You need not have been so scrupulous. He is ever courteous and considerate—attentions that woman in her vanity is always too ready to accept as single to herself.”

“ O, I took his for what they were worth ! I was under no delusions as to their value.” She tossed her head. There was a spot of anger on her cheek ; some venom in her tone. “ I am sure I

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had no intention," she said loftily, "to disabuse your mind about him."

"No one could do that but himself," answered Isabella proudly. "Though all the world slandered him, I should not listen or believe." She drooped her sad head, knotting and unknotting her fingers. "I hoped I had a friend," she said; "but I think I am quite alone."

Fanchette sulked a little, though with a certain bewildered contempt in her mind. How was one to circumvent this loyal fool, so obdurate in her love's faith? If all evidence was so to be discredited by her, what was the use of their conspiring to produce it? And as she thought—even with some grudging sympathy with a pertinacity which was, after all, characteristically feminine—two soft arms came about her neck, and two soft entreating eyes looked into hers.

"Fanchette; in pity tell me, *what* am I to do."

The girl sniffed, and caught her breath. If she had but little heart, the emotionalism in her was always a responsive quantity. She answered, almost hysterically:

"O! what is the good of asking me? He is gone, I tell you—some say summoned by the archduke to answer for his conduct. Perhaps he is dead by now."

She saw the roses quit the cheek, and clutched at the slender form as it swayed backwards. She was full of passionate remorse and alarm in a moment.

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“ Mistress—dearest, it was a lie. Look up—listen to me—I am a wicked heartless wretch ! He is not dead—I know it—I was told by one who knows it. He has been to Vienna, and left again : it is thought he has gone to the wars.”

She wept, and upbraided herself, and fondled the scarce animate form, calling upon it to speak, to forgive her, not to die and curse her to eternal despair. And presently her urgency prevailed, and a tinge of colour came back to the white face, and the ghost of a voice reassured her :

“ Without one word to me ? ”

She took her in her arms, and rocked her, soothing and protesting in one :

“ They are all alike for that. Loin des yeux, loin du coeur, is it not. There, don’t give way so. It is wiser anyhow that he should disappear for the time being ; and like enough he sees it, and sees clearer than you. If he’s all your fancy paints him, he’ll come back again when the dust he’s kicked up has settled ; and in the meantime— ” she ventured to coax, trusting to the impression she was making—
“ I’d try to forget him, dear mistress, an I were you—if for no better reason than to prepare yourself against emergencies. He’s not strong enough to fight against a throne, and if he hasn’t realised that by this time, a little reflection will be sure to convince him. And then it isn’t as if you were asked to make your choice between honey and gall. His Highness by all accounts is a very proper man,

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tender but self-willed, as we women like, and with all the advantage of youth on his side——”

She submitted, falling silent, to the quick passionate rebuff which her words evoked. Isabella, putting her aside, rose to her feet and stood breathing spasmodically, her hand crushed to her bosom.

“There,” she said, panting a little: “you have said enough. I have been weak and foolish; and I am ashamed. Forget everything I said, Fanchette, and let me forget it. I am very tired, and I wish to sleep.”

With a face of formal duty, the maid rose from her knees, and, very stiff and punctilious, completed her young mistress’s night toilette. Not another word did she speak; until presently the parting benediction, which she uttered in a voice so cold that it might have been mistaken for an anathema.

And Isabella? Once alone, she crept and found her basil-pot, and sighed her love’s orisons among its muffling leaves, where still the envious flowers delayed to show, and eased her sore heart in silent tears.

Gone to the wars? And without one word or sign to her? Perhaps to be slain, and so to leave her for evermore bereaved and desolate. O, was it true—was it? Did he want to die, perhaps, because his hope was already killed? She had killed it; it was her silence that had driven him to despair. The anguish of that thought was exquisite. He had trusted to her, and she had failed him. O, for some

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poison in these gentle leaves, to breathe and sleep and die upon her love ! She never once doubted his fidelity—not once. All those cruel calumnies had left her unshaken. Her pure heart was incapable of such treachery. They might as well forbear to hurt a faith that was immortal.

In the midst of her agony a thought stole upon her like balm. A report !—it was nothing more than that. Was it possible that he himself had given it currency, in order to throw dust in their eyes—that, under cover of it, he had returned to Parma, and was somewhere in hiding, waiting till he could communicate with her ? There was life, passionate, exulting, in that reaction to hope. How could she ever have believed he would abandon her so, after what had passed between them—her lord, her noble heart ? She was a poor trustless thing, unworthy of his choice.

Steadfastly she strove to keep that dear belief before her eyes ; and, little as it was, it was enough to steel her to endure the long long days of waiting. For still they passed and passed without a sign, drawing her hour by hour nearer to the fate she so unspeakably dreaded. She did not ask herself by what miracle she was to escape her doom. She felt only that to see him again, to rest upon his heart, were to solve all difficulties.

And so the year sped on. To Fanchette she betrayed no more of herself ; only her basil was her only friend ; and she would speak softly to it, and

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with pretty wooings ask it to blossom soon—very soon now, lest its tardiness should prove their undoing. It was odd and pitiful how she had come to regard this plant as the sure symbol of their destiny.

About the court, those who knew, and watched her privately, believed her to be truly reconciled. She was very quiet and gracious with all ; they took her sweet seriousness for first flower of the solemn election to which she was called, as one fits oneself with gravity for the sacrament. And yet she was guileful—a most wilful and passionate rebel under her seeming repose, since Love had first taught her his outlawry. Only she had learned discretion of necessity ; she could play a part with her spies, and lead them on to false conclusions. Because for her love's dear using alone she preserved the perfect treasure of her truth and loyalty. What did anything else matter ?

Once or twice during this time she received a letter from her royal betrothed—documents of the heart inevitably a little pompous, but kind and manly. There was no least allusion in them, of course, to a dismissed episode, no condescending to a reference to so inconsiderable a spark in the orbit of the imperial system as a certain M. Tiretta. Had there been, Isabella might have cast them aside, the formal pretence of reading once achieved, with less impatience than she did. And yet, in honest truth, they were more than she deserved.

And still the year, like a celestial lamplighter,

ran down its golden ladder from the topmost heavens ; and as the sun dropped daily from its high estate, and the earth grew slowly chill, so into the girl's heart stole ever more and more the killing frost of hope deferred. All her first despair crept back, and now with renewed terror that it must indeed be as Fanchette had hinted, and that he was gone to fight—perhaps was even now lying stark and dead upon some battlefield, or weeks-long buried under the bloody sods. For all her frantic longings and strained listening, no reference to him in her father's court had ever again, since that shameful day, reached her ears ; and there were already wedding rumours in the air.

Then, in the loneliness of her room, she fell upon her knees and called miserably upon death, if he had taken her love, to take her too—to save her from the unspeakable anguish of the fate with which she was now nearly threatened.

And death responded, after his manner with those who impiously take his name. He saved her, as she prayed him to, but, inasmuch as her plea to him was conditional on a life, with a life he answered.

Early in December came the news that the Duchess Louise-Elizabeth had been seized with the smallpox at Versailles ; and within a few days she was dead.

Isabella had her desire : the wedding was indefinitely postponed.

CHAPTER XX

THE FACE IN THE CROWD

ISABELLA had loved her mother, truly if rather fearfully, and in return had been loved by her with as condescending a devotion as a spirit so incessantly restless and ambitious as that of Louis XV.'s eldest daughter could lavish on a child not born into the first order of creation. How the indomitable sick woman had rejoiced in that early fulfilment of her hopes, when the Austrian ambassador had come to put an end to her doubts and apprehensions, her communications to her husband show. She was jubilant ; and so was impure old Bien-aimé, who wrote the most touching and beautiful letter to congratulate his son-in-law on the event, a letter full of sentiments "*de les exprimer pourrait les diminuer.*" And now, before she might see brought to ripeness any one of the countless schemes she was perpetually revolving in her feverish brain for her family's aggrandisement, she had herself dropped in a moment from the tree like a rotten medlar.

The shock of her death did more to bring poor Isabel to her senses than the harshest tyranny could have done. It seemed a very retribution on her

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for her sins ; and I doubt, if it had been possible to marry her then offhand, but she would have acquiesced in her fate—with despairing, perhaps, but without further revolt. The thought that during all this time, while her mother had been sojourning for her health's sake at Versailles, she had been planning in her guilty soul an act which, if committed, would have struck the deadliest of blows at the pride and trusting affection, possibly at the life itself, of that beloved parent, filled her with inexpressible remorse. She went in these days with a face so pale and scared, that one might have believed her haunted by the thought of her own direct responsibility for the tragedy. The very memory of what had been seemed to her a profanation to the sainted dead. She strove to cleanse her conscience of all offence, even to the lingering shadow of a dream which now could never come to be realised. She told herself so : it was ended and finally ; how, even if but one star from its firmament were allowed to twinkle on, could she kneel and pray, without blasphemy, for the repose of her mother's soul ?

To her father, in this emotional reaction, she wistfully and naturally turned. Their common sorrow brought them closer together than they had ever been as yet ; and, while mothering his weakness and his distress, she bitterly reproached herself for all that past unfilial attitude of hers towards what she had considered his shallowness and vanity.

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Now she recognised, or believed that she recognised, how much more fondly wise than its chosen expression had been the purpose underlying that attempt of his upon her faith. She no longer blamed him for it, because his method had been simply characteristic.

It had been characteristic, indeed, as was no less the selfish quality of his present grief. He bewailed his loss, almost as if it implied some treachery to himself. Having grown resigned in submission to the stronger will, to which he had conceded the practical management of all his affairs of State and policy, he felt as if cruelly abandoned by it at that moment in the promised maturation of its schemes when its support was most needed. It was always his helplessness rather than his sorrow that came uppermost in the tale of woe; and perhaps to the heart of the woman and potential mother that made the surest appeal. In ministering to his despair Isabella forgot her own.

And yet it is not to be inferred that Don Philip had been other than devoted in his way to the vigorous soul who through such long years had been his spirited coadjutor and support. To do him justice, he had purposed on the first warning note of tragedy to set out for Versailles—an intention for which the king his father-in-law, when he came to hear of it, had gently rebuked him. And, indeed, the journey would have been in vain. Short shrift and shift was the order in all cases where that

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dreaded scourge proved mortal ; and scarce was the breath out of the august body before it was being hurried away by night to the royal mausoleum of Saint Denis, where it was lowered with scant ceremony into the vault from which, thirty years later, the ghouls of the Revolution were to tear it, with fifty others, to scatter its still impregnated dust to the winds. It was from Marly—whither the Court, after its custom, had already fled the terror—that Louis wrote his mild reproof, ending it with the words “ *mes yeux baignent de larmes.* ”

So Don Philip, frustrated in his dutiful design, stayed on at home, and regarded and pitied himself with something of the stupefaction of the dreamer, who, thinking himself standing among company, discovers suddenly that he has forgotten to put on his clothes. Thus he felt as if delivered naked and aghast to a situation with which he was quite unable to cope. He had leaned so long on that imperious will that he seemed to have lost his capacity for standing alone.

His prostration was even abject while it lasted ; but the true quality of grief is to be measured more by endurance than collapse. Those who succumb easily revive easily, and it was not to be supposed but that that volatile brain would quickly rally from its depression under the stimulus of such local distractions as offered.

Those were necessarily at first of a mortuary complexion, touching such matters as the depth and

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period of the court mourning, the fasts to be observed and the masses to be sung. The opportunities presented by obsequies are only fully appreciated by two classes—those standing at the opposite social extremes. A funeral is the poor man's chance, and the prince's, since each in his way borrows a relative distinction from the Majesty of Death. In the one case it is a brief affair, in the other a protracted ; but at the bottom of both there is the same sentiment of reflected glory. Whether it be a lying-in-state, or a hearse with one poor coach to follow, it is the corpse which ennobles the relatives, and makes them greater than themselves by reason of their kinship with it.

Now the widower awoke to the exciting potentialities of his position as chief mourner, and to the realisation that a living ass might command more attention than a dead lioness. As executor to the mighty departed, it was his to rule, and thereby to take the credit for, the quality of the honours to be accorded her. He extracted, at least, some revivifying comfort from the process, some soothing flattery from the profuse condolences of his subjects. When the dead was declared great and unforgettable—and, indeed, whatever the personal trend of Louise Elizabeth's ambition, her forceful character had left its stamp upon her times—he inhaled the incense as proffered to his own nostrils. His vanity swallowed the innumerable eulogies, monodies and elegiacs, extolling the deceased's virtues, and, waxing fat upon

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them, like Jeshurun kicked. "Where, then," ended one passionate encomiast, Frugoni, an abbé, "O, where, then, Death, is thy sting!" It is certain that, if it lay rankling in that bereaved heart, there was also much solace of honey to alleviate the pain it caused.

In short the duke only took means according to his lights to forget his trouble; and what should we all do, under like circumstances, but so study to fight the brooding demon of morbidity? Did he find a wholesome diversion in discussing with la Coque the details of a mourning coat, the braided sorrow of its cuffs, the sad expressive disposition of its buttons, why grudge him that comfort simply because we ourselves could see none in it? If a man can find solace for his grief in cat's-cradle, by all means let him play with strings. The two played with strings in another sense, composing between them a touching threnody, thick with the most harassing sobs and wails, to which their own tears responded plentifully. They enjoyed it all immensely in a sort of smug lugubrious way. His Highness looked double the man he had been after a week or two's enjoyment of these softly melancholy preoccupations.

To Isabella, standing wistful and sorrowful in the background, the improvement in her father's spirits brought, with a greater ease on his account, some vague feeling of distress. She was glad to see him shed his despair for a healthier sentiment; yet she

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could not but marvel over the choice of the means he could adopt, and find sufficient, for the medicining of a sick soul. She tried to blind herself to the essential shallowness of the nature which could thus console its tragedy with sweetmeats ; she tried to make allowances, to be steadfastly loyal to her own converted sense of duty ; yet the conscious truth in her would not be so hoodwinked, or wholly justify to her the self-sacrifice of which she had been so lavish.

Still she would have remained faithful to its ideals, if only he had continued to cling to her ; but, as she felt herself, her sympathy and loving support, needed by him less and less—even at last, as he developed these other healing resources, impatiently rejected—a sense of such loneliness settled upon her as brought her own soul near the verge of despair. She shrank back, like one who has put out a confident hand to caress a dog, and has been savagely torn for one's trust. Thenceforth she seemed to realise, as she had never done yet, the complete misery of her state. She had thrown away the substance to grasp at the shadow, and her reward was in the righteousness of utter desolation.

One day Fanchette alluded before her, with a disdainful lip, to a poor little neglected herb, which had stood long untended on its table in a sunless corner.

“ Shall I throw it away, your Highness ? ” she said. “ I think it is dead.”

“ Dead ! ” The word brought a shock of colour

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to the girl's cheek, which fled as quickly, leaving it ashy white. She seemed to have awakened in an instant as from a distressed dream to the reality of something left beside her when she fell asleep. So a mother, irresistibly overcome, might startle to reconsciousness of her baby weakling, and sit up aghast, with panic ears strained for reassurance of the soft-drawn breaths. Her baby—theirs ! and dying or dead ! She looked, with wide eyes glazed, staring at the pretty piteous thing, which her heart, in its stupefaction, had forgotten. And then a rush of anger swept her, coming from what source the power that made the feminine must answer.

“ Why do you refer to it like that ? ” she said. “ Am I to submit for ever to your insults and innuendoes ? You should have made it your duty to water it without consulting me. What has it done, poor thing, to be so cruelly treated ? Please to attend to it at once.”

And she walked haughtily away, scornful of the storm she knew her reproof would evoke in that hysteric bosom ; careless of how her words might rankle and give forth poisonous humours.

But that night she dreamed that she awoke and saw her lover stand beside her ; and his face to her ghast eyes appeared all thinly laced with blood ; and in his hand he held a shrunk and withered plant.

“ Dead ! ” he moaned : “ O, faithless and untrue, look here ! Dead, dead ! ”

And so wailing, while she strove madly for speech,

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he passed and faded, seeming to melt away into the darkness ; and, struggling, she awoke in truth, her cheeks all wet with tears, and held out wild entreating arms.

“ No ! ” she whispered : “ Beloved—no, no ! Not to take it with you—not to kill me like that ! I will be true ; I will never sin to it or you again.” And so she lay sobbing, a great fear and rapture at her heart.

Then, suddenly, listening, with panic pulses, she rose, and, the cold moonbeams playing on her white breast and feet, stole to a shadowy corner, and gasped with joy to find *it* still was there, and felt the soil to see that it was moist, and let her tears drop on the shrunken leaves.

She remembered all this the next morning as something that strangely hovered between fact and fancy—a half actual, half dreaming ecstasy like a sleepwalker's. But, while she could not kill the impression of joy it had recreated in her, she still strove to remain faithful to her resolution of duty to her mother's memory. That was an impossible compromise, of course ; but it sufficed the situation, while matters, owing to the mourning, hung in abeyance.

On the 2nd of February, following that fatal December, a solemn requiem mass for the repose of the soul of Madame Louise-Elizabeth of France, eldest daughter of the King, Infanta of Spain, and Duchess of Parma, was sung at Paris in the Cathedral

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of Notre-Dame. There were present the Dauphin and Dauphiness, Mesdames Adélaïde and Victoire, younger sisters of the deceased, and a host of court notables. The funeral oration was pronounced by the Bishop of Troyes, who, says the chronicler, "found nothing to say about the deceased except the usual banalities, and who even pushed hyperbole so far as to eulogise Don Philip, representing him as one 'adorned with every talent which makes for the first success, with every quality which merits it, unshirking the least labour which assures it.'"

That flattery, when it reached the ears of its object, may likely have stimulated him to an emulation, and more than an emulation, of the "pomp and circumstance" of the Parisian "service solennel." Anyhow, to the public obsequies of the late duchess, which were announced to be held in the Church of the Madonna della Steccata, at Parma, on the 27th March following, all the ingenuity of symbol and device of which an upholstering brain was capable was brought into play, with a result calculated to impress the most flippant with the dignity and majesty of death as interpreted by a master in the art of "make-up."

To quote, somewhat loosely, the words of the same chronicler: "The interior of the church [a fine Renaissance structure, in the Greek form, dating from the early sixteenth century] was hung with black cloth embellished with a mosaic of bones and tears. Six Corinthian pillars fluted with silver had

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been erected at intervals round the nave. Medallions, representing the virtues of the princess, and ornamented with inscriptions and ermine-lined draperies, filled the intercolumniations of the arches both great and small. The octagonal catafalque set in the midst bore the arms of Madame on a field of tears and fleurs-de-lys. Below this rose a pyramid draped with black velvet, having on its summit a crown veiled in crêpe ; while around were grouped six white marble statues representing Religion, Faith, Hope, Charity, and two others that stood for Death. From the vaulted roof hung a great baldaquin ornamented with five sable plumes.

“ The presence of the court bishop, the stately and melancholy intoning, combined, with the throb of the organ, the wailing of the stringed instruments and the countless lights, to give to the ceremony a majesty worthy of the Infanta.”

Rather an abrupt pull-up that, as if the author in the midst of his declamation had been hit suddenly in the middle. But enough has been described to illustrate the fertility of the brain responsible for the decorations.

On the day of the service, the streets from an early hour were thronged with sombre-clad citizens all hurrying to anticipate all others in the securing of the best places for viewing and hearing. It was a cold clear morning, and the soaring dome of the church, surmounting its four shallow cupolas, seemed to glitter very remote and quiet up in its blue vault.

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More than all the glooming symbols in the depths below it spoke the free tranquil thought of immortality, lovely and consoling ; and so it seemed to two sad unmothered eyes, that caught a glimpse of it through the window of the state coach, as that solemn vehicle approached the porch.

By now all business was suspended in the city, a tithe of whose population was packed away within those close and throbbing walls, while hundreds, unable to gain a footing in the building, crowded the Piazza and all the approaches outside, awaiting the arrival of the ducal party.

Among these watchers was a young gentleman, who had come riding in that morning from Mantua thirty miles away. He had left the old Virgilian town at midnight, being hard pressed for time, and had entered Parma to the clang of tolling bells, many and monotonous. The sound at first had knocked upon his heart with a strange foreboding, and he had reined in, with a thick catch at his throat. What did this melancholy music portend—and these sombre crowds, all silent, all intent, all streaming in one direction ?

“ His slackening steps pause at the gate—
Does she wake or sleep ?—the time is late—
Does she sleep now, or watch and wait ?
She has watched, she has waited long,
Watching athwart the golden grate
With a patient song.”

A mad conceit—an insane fear. And yet—he

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bent, put a brief hoarse question to a passer-by and learnt the truth.

Her mother—dead some months now, as he knew. He breathed out a little laugh of relief, reckless, self-scorning, and pushed on his way. In so far, at least, the occasion was opportune ; he might see her, and not be seen. It was for that very purpose he had taken advantage of the sudden armistice to hurry from Lusatia, while the fighting he had been engaged in was suspended, and speed these long leagues back to the Lombard plains. He had travelled day and night ; he was war-worn and spent with weariness ; yet he would think his pains well recompensed by one glimpse of the loved face. Only for one moment to stay the insatiable hunger of his heart—to acquire new nerve and resolution for the end that could not now be long delayed. He desired, he told himself, to learn that she was reconciled and happy ; that the ruin with which he had threatened her young life was averted, and then he would leave her once more, this time never to return. And so men will go out of their way to lie to themselves, knowing that the truth stands steadfast to the good resolution which first inspired it.

He put up his horse, and, strolling out, mingled with the people. He was reckless of discovery, as one must be who is reckless of his life. He had timed his approach to the church so fortuitously that he could see, over the heads of the mob, the ducal cortège as it accompanied the carriages. The

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nearness of her presence—though, penned as he was within that living wall, he could distinguish nothing of it—made his veins throb between rapture and agony. And then he bent himself, as the pressure of the crowd relaxed, and it resigned itself to the long hour of waiting before the reappearance of the august mourners, to edging a passage to some nearer coign of vantage, where he might watch, himself unobserved.

His cool persistence—his military bearing and assurance, perhaps—gained him his purpose by degrees. When within two or three of the foremost row, under the shadow of a buttress he stopped and stood fast, abiding the mad moment.

The swell of the organ came to him ; the sweet voices of the choir. Something seemed to rise in his heart, half-suffocating him. And then a magnetic thrill ran through the crowd, and he knew that he was to face the ordeal.

The ducal carriage already waited at the steps. There came out first from the great portal a little group of her Highness's women, and he saw that one of them was Fanchette. At that very moment a surge of the crowd drove him forward and almost from his feet, so that to save himself he had to "rush" two or three of the steps, and to pause an instant to recover his balance before re-descending them. In that second, the girl, looking round, was aware of him, and bending immediately, as if to withdraw her skirts from his neighbourhood,

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whispered : “ At four o’clock, on the Mezzo bridge.”

The next moment, hustled by the guards, he was down again, and near his former position. But the slight disturbance had attracted the attention of a young lady just issuing from the church on her father’s arm. One instant she turned her eyes and saw him ; the next, with a little swerve, momentary, scarce perceptible, she was going down the steps to the carriage.

CHAPTER XXI

ACROSS THE BRIDGE

WITH the afternoon the town had resumed its normal aspect; the shops were re-opened; the stream of grave and frivolous circulated with its wonted restlessness and volubility. Only the ashes of a Lenten disposition seemed to have survived from the morning, the human traffic going sad-suited and with a mock attempt at seriousness in its demeanour. Still, the sky was blue, the little river sparkled, and the harnesses of the mules would not stop tinkling for all the enforced sobriety of the occasion.

A veiled young lady, coming from the direction of the Palazzo della Pilotta, hesitated an instant before setting foot on the crowded thoroughfare of the Ponte di Mezzo, and then made up her mind and went boldly forward. Half-way across, she just signed to a loiterer who stood leaning against the parapet, whereupon, detaching himself from his position, the man accompanied her footsteps, neither of them speaking a word. Making westward from the bridge—which continued across the water the main artery of traffic, that ancient Via Aemilia which exactly bisected the town—they presently

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reached a less frequented quarter ; and, coming after a time to the open spaces neighbouring on the *Barriera d'Azeglio*, the girl at length, with a shrug of resignation, slackened her pace, and in the same moment invited her companion to speak.

"To have selected for a meeting place," she exclaimed, "the most populous spot in the city ! Bah ! But I had no time to think."

"What does it matter, Fanchette ? "

She stopped, and looked at him, with a little fretful stamp of her foot.

"Are you tired of life that you say so ? "

"Is my life in danger ? "

"What do you suppose—here, in *Parma* ? "

"I do not trouble myself to suppose anything."

"You are too courageous to think of yourself, is it not ? That would be very fine, if only sometimes you would think of other people."

He looked at her meekly, without answering ; nor did she speak for a little ; but she had all the advantage of her veil in that mute inquisition.

"You are altered," she said presently. "You look older and graver than you used."

"I am both," he said.

"Well, you have need to be serious. Also, I do not think you even as moderately good-looking as you were. But you are bronzed, which is something ; and you have a scar on your temple. What have you been doing with yourself these eight months ? "

"I have been helping to fight *Austria's* enemies."

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“ And have run away from them at last ? ”

“ Yes—during a truce, while they are trying to negotiate terms of peace.”

“ You have come to the wrong place for peace. You will soon find it so, unless you study more discretion. My God ! the shock it was to me this morning to see you back again amongst us. What devil brought you ? and why, having done wisely after all, couldn't you let well alone ? ”

“ I couldn't, that is why—for no reason, I suppose, but just that I am my own weak illogical self. I wanted to make sure that I had done right—to find out——”

“ What ? ”

“ If she were happy.”

“ Of course she is—that is to say as happy as it is proper for her to be under the circumstances. O, yes ! it is quite consistent with your illogic, is it not, to give that sigh. If I had told you she was miserable, your face, no doubt, would have lighted up with a holy joy.”

“ Is the wedding-day fixed ? ”

“ It will be, sure and soon enough, when once we can cast our black. This misfortune—it is enough to make a saint blaspheme. But for its happening, it might likely have been fast-bound by this time ; and then her felicity would have been her husband's affair, and all would-be gallants might forego their tender concern—for her happiness, God preserve us ! ”

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"If she is happy and contented, Fanchette, what makes you so angry over the postponement?"

"It aggravates me so to see you turn up again, when we had all thought you comfortably laid."

"Ah-ha! Now we are revealing. Who are the 'we'?"

"You are like to find out soon enough, unless you disappear as you came. I can tell you, monsieur, you went none too soon in the first instance."

"I was beginning to realise myself that I was getting unpopular. And yet I was only too attentive to my task. Fanchette?"

"What do you want?"

"I want you to raise your veil."

"Certainly I shall not."

"You are afraid that your eyes might betray what your lips conceal."

"O, indeed! And what is that?"

"That she is not happy at all. That she is miserable."

"It is not true."

"O, Fanchette! Is it not? You professed to be my friend once."

"Am I not proving my friendship by meeting you like this—by running a hundred risks to save you from the consequences of your own madness?"

"I am indifferent to all consequences, so I may but see her."

"Well, you have seen her; you have disturbed

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again the waters that had settled down so peacefully ; and now I hope you are satisfied."

" How can I say ? She saw me, as I saw her ; but with what result ? Do you not know ? "

" Never mind what I know."

" That is as much as to confess that I have done harm in your opinion by coming."

" Harm ? My God, I should think you have done harm ! "

He gave a little odd crowing laugh.

" You can't help betraying the truth, you see, for all your efforts. But what does it matter ? I have seen her face, and it is enough. Fanchette—" he touched the scar on his temple—" do you note this ? It knocked me silly for the time being ; and, while I lay insensible, I think my spirit left my body and flew to her. She was asleep ; I could not wake her ; and I turned to see how near the basil was to flowering. O, my God, girl ! it was all shrunk and neglected ; and I thought I took it in my hand and turned to her with wild reproach. But at that moment she opened her eyes, and, seeing the deathless sorrow in them, the words died upon my lips—and on the instant I awoke, to find someone staunching my wound. Tell me—does she keep the basil still—she has not forgotten it ? "

Fanchette, like all fundamental worldlings, was helplessly superstitious. She stared and gasped behind her veil, hearing of this ghostly coincidence. How was she to dare henceforth, shrinking, conscious

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of her guilt, under the detective eyes of the unseen ? She could only gulp and shake her head in answer.

He laughed again :

“ And you pretend to me that she is happy ! ”

“ O, monsieur ! ” said the girl, inclining at last towards the refuge of hysteria : “ if she is not, have you any way to make her so ? No way at all that is possible—that can conceivably end in anything but death to yourself and disaster to her. If she had not learned to forget, she had learned to be resigned ; and now you come to undo again the work of months. It is cruel.”

“ Is it not, Fanchette—a most damnable cruelty. But you do not know the full measure of my baseness. I promised the archduke himself that I would forbear, would withdraw myself from the temptation, would endeavour at the eleventh hour to vindicate my honour. But death was in the bargain ; and, if in my despair I have broken it, it is the fault of Death, that would not come to me, however much I sought and called him. It is useless to threaten me with death.”

“ O, in heaven’s name walk on ! I shall betray myself.”

“ Confess at once she is not happy, then.”

“ There, I confess it. O, you have driven her mad ! ”

“ Come on, Fanchette. Now, listen to me, and believe me. I had truly meant no more when I came than to see her, myself unsuspected—to com-

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fort my eyes and my conscience with the assurance of her happiness—at least of her resignation—and then to go as silently as I had appeared. And what do I find?—a tragedy of unconquerable faith, that in its every look and gesture stabs me to the heart. Now you must tell me all—yes, all, all. She accepted my supposed desertion—how? ”

“ As you would have wished her to, no doubt.”

“ She still believed in me ? ”

“ Yes ; and in your truth—even after she heard it reported you had gone to the wars.”

“ God bless her—O, God bless her ! ”

“ Will you not go away again now, monsieur ? ”

“ Fanchette, are you not our friend—dear Fanchette ? ”

“ It is madness, I say. I can do nothing. I will not listen.”

“ Is she not happy since this morning ? You will tell me that at least.”

“ You will ruin her.”

“ Ah ! you do not know what we know. Ruin is in separation. Only to meet—to speak together once again ! ”

“ Why should I help you to what I feel is not only wrong but useless ? Likely, if I were to be found out, I should be given to the death you so despise.”

“ You need never be discovered. Tell me no more than where to come upon her. Then she can dismiss me or not as she wills. I swear I will go, if she bids me.”

“ And if she does not ? ”

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“ It would be out of your hands. Only it is just that the decision at last should rest with her. I feel that now as I have never felt it before—mad fool that I am, always to be so governed by impulse. What right had I to judge for her, to repudiate my trust, to banish myself unbidden? She gave me her first beautiful troth, long before that other had made up his mind, and it was for her, not me, to cancel the bond if she would. And though I yielded to him, I took no oath, I made no promise; I said only I would seek a solution of the impossible in death. I was faithful to that—and Death refused the test. He fled me, while I sought him everywhere. And then I knew. There can be no solution of the impossible in Death the destroyer, but only in Love the creator. From Love I must seek the final decision. If it had been evident in her happiness, I say I would have gone again as I came. But now I will go no more until she bids me.”

He ceased, on a note of deep emotion, but of inflexible resolve, and for a space they walked on together in silence. Then presently the girl spoke, in a cold restrained little voice, whose tone might have been meant to convey anything between acquiescence and defiance.

“ You do me honour, monsieur, thus finally to throw off the mask before me—to favour me for the first time with your full confidence. If I notice an inconsistency here and there, why it is only natural in a lover; and——”

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“What inconsistency, Fanchette?”

“Your cruelty to her Highness, for instance, which suddenly becomes consideration for her; your bad faith to monseigneur the archduke, which all in a moment becomes righteousness. But it is all one for the moral, which is your determination to have your way at any cost. I have no more to say, then—only this. I have warned you, and you will not be warned—therefore do not blame me for any consequences that may ensue. For me, I have my duty to my mistress, and that is enough. For you, if you are resolved to rush upon your doom, there is this piece of information, which is in truth open to all. Her Highness goes to-morrow to Colorno, whither the duke her father will follow her in the course of a few days. It is just possible, in the interval before he comes, that she may be tempted to visit Aquaviva’s gardens, of which she is so affolée—but I do not know. Au revoir, monsieur—I wish I could say adieu.”

He would have detained her, to protest, to explain, to pay a glowing tribute to her friendship and generosity—but she would have none of it.

“Thank me when you are out of the wood,” she said. “For the moment, if you value your own safety, hide deeper in it—that is my advice. We may be watched and observed at this instant, for all I know—” and, peremptorily bidding him stay where he was, she turned and hurried away.

CHAPTER XXII

ANTICIPATION

IT is a mistake to suppose that it is the manly qualities in a man which invariably appeal most to women's affections. Very often, indeed, it is their exact antitheses—indecision, dependence, helplessness—which excite in tender breasts the fondest response. Paradoxically, every woman is a mother before she is a virgin, else, save in foretasting the guerdon of love, could she never suffer the ordeal which is to qualify her for that reward. She becomes a mother by right of the test to which she has submitted, which is in truth the test of her capacity for cherishing the weakling, for nourishing, for protecting and for sympathising in all ways with its weakness. Wherefore, as she is the instinctive nurse of frailty, her affections turn more naturally to it than to the strength which is independent of her.

There are women, of course, who would always rather be coerced by a brutal husband than consulted by an irresolute one. There are women, also, of the manly, tailor-made type, to whom a sick dog or horse appeals with fifty times the force of an ailing child. But I make bold to think that they are in

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the minority, and that the mass of the sex is inclined to be attracted more by the weak than by the strong qualities in men. For weakness may be lovable, while strength is only admirable; and a woman defrauded in her helpful instinct is a woman deprived of her essential meaning.

If I have made it appear that Tiretta was a masterful character, I have sketched his portrait awry, and must revise it. He was, in truth, in many ways an entirely weak creature, impressionable, emotional, and lacking the first quality of decision. One sees how he had been persuaded to dance attendance on Fortune, lingering on in her ante-room in the vain hopes of that summons to her presence which a more resolute soul would have enforced. One sees how inconsistent he could be to his own self-sacrifices, when their fruits seemed to him to be unjustifiably delayed. He was full of passionate impulses and impotent remorse—a man in courage, a woman in regrets. Yet he had two qualities which were enough to redeem him utterly in all eyes that were truly feminine, and those were charm and loveliness. He was above all things lovable, and by virtue of that disposition alone might easily have captured and absorbed into his own a more guileful heart than that of the simple, affectionate child in whose soft bosom he had awakened the unconscious instincts of motherhood. Isabella startled to the knowledge of his reappearance

with the mad rapture of a mother receiving back her long-lost child.

Now all would be well, her fluttering, unreasoning heart assured her ; now all would be well, her illogical sex proclaimed. She could think of nothing but that he had returned, that the long, long days of doubt and anguish were ended, that the good reasons he had had for imposing them on her would be made lovingly clear. All the sorrows, the remorse, the dutiful resolutions of the past drear months took wing in a moment like doleful crows. For that, no doubt, her cruel disillusionment about her father was part to blame. Yet, all said, love, without question, would have had its way with her in the end. She had not the power to resist so dear an importunate ; she was swayed in all things by affection, and she had no one trustworthy weapon in her soul's armoury to oppose to it.

He had come back to her because he needed her—because they could not survive apart. To realise that was to forget all else—the danger once implied in her father's half-veiled threats ; Fanchette's assurances that a certain one must sooner or later come to be convinced, and resigned to the thought, of his own impotence ; the terror she herself had had that she had been cast off by him because she had been found wanting in the crucial test. If that had been so, his masculine resolution had been no proof against his need of her ; and in proportion as he needed her his weakness was a thing for

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transport. It is characteristic of the needs of lovers that they appear insensible to the fear of, or the reasonable consideration for, any obligations whatsoever outside their own. Very dimly the thought of her engagement shadowed Isabella's mind; it seemed like an illusion that change of circumstance had already half dissipated; she had a vague feeling that, were reference to the fact to be craftily avoided, the fact itself would gradually be overlooked and forgotten. She was like a punished child, dismissed back to her play, bearing, with the infinite pathos of childhood, no grudge against her unjust judges, happy only to be forgiven and thought no more about, while she revelled in the sunshine from which she had been so long debarred. She was happy—happy; laughter frolic'd in her eyes; a bird sang in her breast. She did not know how her crown of bliss was to realise itself; only somehow he would find a way; she was to see him, hear him, be loved by him once more.

All night her heart went dancing; it danced on to the joy of the morning, and awoke as if to a sense of wild reprieve. She kept her secret to herself—the secret of her knowledge of his return—but its fumes were in her brain, and she could not altogether hide the exhilaration they caused there. Fanchette, attending to her Highness's toilette, was in a curiously silent mood—morose even, and uncommunicative. Her mistress sought, by every merry art, to coax the girl into a response to her own bright

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spirits. She laughed at and rallied her, she overflowed with kindness, she would not be denied for all the icy rebuffs she encountered. But without much avail, it seemed. In truth the *camériste*, perplexed and a little conscience-haunted, was in the last temper for welcoming such approaches. She could have wished rather for affront, impatience, inconsiderateness — anything that would have appeared to justify her in offence, to provoke her to retaliation. But this unassailable sweetness was so disarming that for the moment it confounded her.

In the afternoon she accompanied her mistress to Colorno ; and, there in the carriage, urgency at last lent her desperation. She stiffened herself, and spoke :

“ You are glad to be returning, mademoiselle ? ”

“ O, how glad, Fanchette ! ”

To Colorno, with its unutterable memories ; to paradise regained ; to the gardens where the wild love-flower grew, which his lips, and hers, had kissed ! That she was bidden on her way thither seemed like a tacit surrender by authority to the inevitable. It must have known what associations that restoration would awake.

All the journey hitherto she had lain back in a blissful trance, listening to the ponderous rolling of the wheels as they gathered up the reluctant miles, incessantly framing in her mind a picture of the reunion that was to be, with its joys, its tender reproaches, its loving reassurances. The past was

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to be resumed, as if no black winter of separation had ever interposed. And spring was coming—spring with its wakening birds, and the blossoms breaking in its orange-groves. Smiling, she looked at the faithful little basil-pot by her side, and secretly caressed its leaves, now long recovered from the neglect to which she had once in her cruelty committed them. She would have bent and kissed them but for Fanchette.

The maid, setting her lips resolutely, did not answer for awhile.

“ Then, *I* am not,” she said suddenly.

Isabella glanced at her, a little surprised.

“ You do not like the country, Fanchette ? ”

“ O ! as for that,” said the girl, “ the value of a place to me is the value of its company.”

“ Well, you will have plenty in a little while.”

“ Plenty, and to spare,” said Fanchette, drily.

“ What do you mean, child ? ”

“ I foresee just one too many for my peace of mind, that is all.”

“ One ! What one ? ”

“ Cannot your Highness guess ? Yet I saw very well that I was not the only one of us two to make note of somebody’s reappearance in Parma yesterday.”

Isabella gave a little gasp ; but subterfuge was impossible to her. Only she sat silent, and breathing quickly, for a few moments.

“ Well,” she said presently, with difficulty : “ what

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if you were not ? I do not see how your peace of mind is affected by M. Tiretta's return."

"Hush, I implore your Highness!" said Fanchette. "I would not betray the poor man, whatever distress his persistence may cause me. Possibly your Highness may have observed the recklessness of the act which brought us for that one instant together. I shuddered, I can tell you, for his safety—and it was all that he might whisper to me to meet him later on the Mezzo bridge."

"And you met him?" There was soft eagerness, a restrained rapture, but no least suspicion in the fervid tone. Fanchette shrugged her shoulders perceptibly.

"What would you! One in the last extremity must take a bull by the horns. It is safer, at least, than to run away from him. Yes, I met him, mademoiselle." She hardened herself to the passionate entreaty of the eyes, of the lips that mutely questioned her. "He had in truth," she said, "been to the wars; and now, taking advantage of a truce, had come back like a roaring devil to renew his assault upon me."

"To renew—what?"

"O, mademoiselle! I would have spared you; but you know you never would believe. Be assured, nevertheless, that I was not to be so harried from my honesty. I entreated him to release me for once and for all from his importunities; to abstain further from compromising me with one to whom my heart

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was given. Ah—bah ! I might as well have appealed to a blood-thirsty tiger. And now I shall know what persecution to expect in this quiet place.”

Even as she ended, her voice faltered, as if in some instinctive misgiving, and she hung her head.

And Isabella ? Incredulity, amazement, indignation—in turn each emotion flashed its light across the beautiful face, and quivered and passed—to be succeeded by scorn : scorn so sovereign, so consuming, that calumny, shrivelling in its overriding flame, died in an instant on those lying lips.

“ Fanchette.”

“ Yes, madame ? ”

“ Fanchette, look at me.”

The girl obeyed, caught her breath with a start, and lowered her lids.

“ Look at me, I say.”

Abject already in that revelation, the maid, half-whimpering, again essayed to lift her hang-dog eyes, and, in the very struggle to brazen out her falsehood, collapsed and burst into tears.

“ Liar ! ” said Isabella softly. She was wrought beyond her gentle self : the wanton wickedness of the slander—never for one moment believed else by her incorruptible heart — had transformed her from a Hebe into a Megaera. “ Are you not a liar ? ”

Fanchette, weeping hysterically, sought to gasp out an excuse :

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“ If I misunderstood his meaning——”

But lovely scorn swept the cowardly pretence aside :

“ You misunderstood nothing. It is I who have misunderstood, who have been blind all this time to the true character of the despicable creature I have trusted. You vile thing, so to hire yourself out to traduce a noble name ! Who urged you to it ? In whose pay are you ? Tell me, for I will know.”

She was translated, the sweet tolerant soul—stung to a passion the more deadly by reason of the sunshine and happiness from which she had been torn. Fanchette, completely cowed, sobbed and shivered in her corner. She had never even guessed at the existence of these slumbering fires, had never calculated on a faith so obstinate as to be utterly impervious to the assaults of jealousy. She was overwhelmed, terrified, not only by the crushing nature of the retort upon her, but by the particular insight which it revealed.

“ O,—O ! ” she gasped and cried : “ I will tell you, mademoiselle—I will tell you everything, if you will only give me a moment to recover.”

“ You want time,” cried scorn, “ to invent new lies. But you need not hope to deceive me again. I see it all at last—the hints, the cunning preparation of the ground, the snare you thought to lay for unsuspecting feet. And while I was confiding in you, resting on your sympathy, believing you my friend ! O, shame upon such infamy ! I will have

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you whipped, tortured, unless you confess to me at once that it was all a lie."

Fanchette fell upon her knees in the coach with a suppressed scream. She knew enough to know that offended Spain, in so small a matter as the castigation of a servant, could find easy means to have its threats fulfilled to the letter, even in the face of obvious injustice. It would be the "question" first, and exoneration, if any, after. She shook with terror.

"I will confess," she cried: "O, I will confess!"

"It was a lie?"

"Yes—yes."

The Infanta's red lip curled.

"Who urged you to it?—tell me."

"O, mistress!"

"Tell me, I say."

Fanchette choked and battled for breath, writhing her fingers about her face.

"Was it your own mean jealousy of one too noble to stoop to an understanding of your designs upon him? In that case——"

Again the *camériste*, too debased in her terror for resentment, cried out:

"No, no—mistress—listen to me: it was one—his Highness's own favourite—he advised it."

"He? Who?"

Fanchette writhed.

"My father's friend? Who? I will know."

"M. la Coque."

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“ La Coque ! that painted coxcomb ! ” Amazed, for all her scorn, the girl sat a moment dumbfounded. There was revealed here a knowledge, a conspiracy, she had never suspected.

Fanchette, frantic, once she had betrayed her lover, to exonerate him, went on half coherently :

“ He—he is devoted to your Highness’s interests ; he—he only wanted to save your Highness the consequences of a fatal step. It was our tr—true regard for your Highness that made us conspire to open your eyes to the real character of an adventurer.”

“ To open my eyes—by a wicked lie ! ”

Still she sat, as if stupefied ; then leaned forward, strangely quiet.

“ You have opened my eyes, I think. This gentleman is your paramour, is he not ? ”

Fanchette was silent, hanging her head.

“ Come, be bold, girl,” said the Infanta. “ It is not your jealousy, is it, but the jealousy of that small and envious nature towards a nobility he can never reach that has bribed you to this baseness ? ” She leaned back, passing a hand across her forehead as if suddenly overcome. “ That such as you,” she said, “ should dare to sit in judgment on your betters.”

Some note of weariness, of shaken emotion, may have struck upon the acute intuitions of the culprit. She ceased crying, and, raising her head a little, dared a breathless retort :

“ Not in judgment, but in sympathy, mademoiselle, since in imitating our betters we feel with them.”

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“ What is that you say ? ”

“ No one should know better than your Highness how love intoxicates our reason.”

Isabella gazed at the speaker with eyes in which the indignation was slowly giving place to distress.

“ Yes,” she said low.

“ An intrigue is an intrigue,” said Fanchette, growing bolder as the other wavered. “ If it is wrong, we look to high example to make it shameful to us. In the meantime one is powerless where one has given one’s heart away.”

“ No doubt the blame is less yours than his,” said Isabella indistinctly.

“ Ah ! ” said Fanchette—“ if your Highness would only believe in the fondness of the intentions that actuated me. But since they are misunderstood, it is no good to dwell upon them. Only——”

“ Only what, Fanchette ? ”

“ Since our smallness, and envy, and painted coxcombry are not to your Highness’s taste, we had best retire, and leave you to your own devices. You will do what you will do ; and I have done, in all disinterestedness, what I could. Perhaps you will believe me that, even while I was outraging my own feelings to try and safeguard your reputation, I was providing alternatively for the step from which I foresaw you would not be easily dissuaded.”

She spoke at last like an injured saint ; but the venom in her heart, over that contumelious reference to her lover, was rankling and growing in bitter

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intensity as she recovered more and more her confidence.

“ What step, Fanchette ? ” asked Isabella faintly.

The girl shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“ Into the dark—that is all I can say—except that I know where someone is most likely to be found within the next few days.”

She knelt back, sniffing and mopping her eyes, while a silence of some minutes prevailed ; and then a sad little voice came to her :

“ Who shall throw the first stone ? O, Fanchette, we are all sinners together ! ”

CHAPTER XXIII

“ IN THE SILENT WOODY PLACES ”

BISSY had a lodger—strictly Bissy, be it understood. Grandfather Aquaviva had declined from the first to be mixed up in the affair, or to do more than subordinate, for the occasion, his own domestic authority to that of the self-sufficient imp, who was wiser than an owl in his precocious generation. To Bissy was due the happy thought, the conduct of the negotiations which followed, and the ultimate agreement. He accepted the guest, and any responsibility attaching to him—which, nevertheless, he did not anticipate would be serious. Report, in that detached province of horticulture, dealt mistily with reputations, and Bissy, while having his own clues to the stranger's identity, had no reason to connect that with any definite scandal. In any case, where ignorance was cash, it was folly to be wise. Let the lodger call himself what he would—il Signor Talé, or by any other mocking pseudonym—the essential consideration was the ducats, of which he was not sparing. For the first time in his life Bissy enjoyed the gratification of realising handsomely on his own native shrewdness. Grandfather, always preoccupied and unsuspecting, was content

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to laugh, to shrug his shoulders, and secretly to admire the elfish self-importance which had so much worldly foresight in it. He had the same clues to identification as the limb himself, but they lay unnoticed by him. Men and women always passed him by like shadows. They were only to be regarded as coming between the sun and his flower-beds, and the sooner they were gone the better for his content.

As for the guest himself, he had flown upon them, by his own account, from distant battle-fields, arriving errantly in their midst, in a moment, like a fragment of spent shell. It was the happiest of accidents, he declared, which had deposited him where he fell, repose, after that long flight, being the thing of all things which he most needed, together with the opportunity for restful self-communion apart from his fellows. He said this to Bissy, whom he first of all encountered at work in the orange-grove. It seemed some instinct had drawn him there, though of course he was ignorant of the geography of the place. His assurance was astounding, petrifying, but quite captivately compelling. What sweeter spot, he declared, could have offered for his purpose than these fragrant ambushes, wherein one might bury and repose oneself as in the dreaming thickets of Avalon. Was it possible that Providence could have knowingly directed his footsteps to this haven of rare comfort, where he might hide himself away deliciously, unsuspected and undisturbed? In that case of a

guiding Will, it was conceivable that search might reveal some adjacent bower ready to welcome the wanderer into its hospitable arms. Did the boy know of any such? He would be willing to pay handsomely for the boon of a temporary lodging, however primitive, however homely, which neighboured on these perfumed solitudes.

Bissy, gulping down his wonder in a toad-like obstupefaction, suddenly pricked up his ears at that. There was promise here of a golden salve for the tweaking they had once received; only, it seemed, discretion was to be the order. He betrayed, therefore, no sign of recognition, but then and there he had his inspiration, and acted upon it. There was only their own little house, he said, on the southern limit of the gardens. If the signor fancied he could accommodate himself to such simple quarters, he would go and ask his grandfather if he would be willing to take him in for a time—and, he was careful to add, for such a tempting consideration as the signor had suggested.

The signor was greatly obliged—and greatly amused.

“ Despatch, my fine lad,” he said. “ I am not going to haggle over the inestimable value of peace and privacy to a war-sick spirit.”

And so it came that il Signor Talé imposed himself charmingly on the oddly contrasted couple—only always, it was understood, as Bissy’s guest. Aqua-viva, for his part, affected an entire detachment in

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the matter, as though he himself were an independent visitor in his own house. But, for all his somewhat caustic reserve, he too was not long in falling under the irresistible spell of the stranger's personality.

The house—a mere plastered and whitewashed cottage—stood at the extremity of the grounds on the Parma side. Aquaviva, it seemed, believed in that ideal condition of happiness, a lodge in the wilderness. The gardens were the life; the living-place but an insignificant if necessary adjunct to the life. So nature teaches us the right proportions of things. The nest on the rock, the “form” in the grass, the hollow in the tree-trunk—what are these but trifling accessories to possessions which embrace the infinite seas, the open hills, the rolling forests? It is the fit way to regard the values of existence, I am sure. In these days an old railway-carriage and five acres of garden should, it sometimes seems to me, suffice a man for his true proportionate needs.

The house, then, was small; and it was moreover inconvenient and none too clean. It was, after all, only the principal feature in a tiny steading, which included sheds, a miniature fowl-run and a dove-cote. An Indian fig-tree grew untrimmed against its wall; the flags of its yard were broken and moss-grown; a stave of its water-butt was broken, and so on. But it was enough for its purpose, which was to serve as a simple shelter from the elements, a dining and a sleeping place—and now, in its enlarged scope, as a retreat and belvedere.

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At dinner-time the pigeons would fly down from their cote, and, entering the house by its open door, strut, with bobbing heads, about the stone-paved floor, watching for scraps. They soon came to recognise in il Signor Talé a sympathetic spirit, and to congregate about his chair with a persistent confidence which delighted him. In other respects he found in his quarters a seasonableness which glorified all shortcomings. His humble bed smelt of rosemary ; the sparkle of insect life in his ewer testified to the living freshness of the stream from which it was daily replenished ; appetite lent to the homely cuisine an epicurean relish. Raw ham, salted sausage, macaroni, thin broth followed by the *lesso*, or anæmic meat boiled down to produce it, sometimes a cut of *manzo*, which was hobbledehoy calf, cabbage served alone, and always *ricotta*, a sort of buttermilk cheese—on such country fare he was enthusiastic to batten, and his enjoyment of all things was as convincing as it was captivating. He had not been established two days before everyone was in love with him—Annina, the deaf old *contadina* who did the marketing and general housekeeping, solemn Bissy, whose particular property he was, even Aquaviva himself, whom his charm and virile interest in all things won from reticence to an astonishing horticultural communicativeness. They all succumbed to him and became his unconscious confederates and abettors, jealously guarding the privacy it was understood he desired, jealously

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possessing him and shutting the world from their knowledge.

Not that in that respect there was much need for finesse. The season was yet early, the spot isolated, the gardens not sufficiently advanced to attract visitors. Yet it had been a mild winter, and crops, for the time of year, were well forward. Everything was flushing green, not with the chill reluctance of a northern spring, but with a fearless confidence in the loving-kindness of a climate which was always a true bountiful mother to its nurslings. Here but to peep was to open and expand, and the growth of a day was the full measure of its trust in nature. It was seldom that that trust was abused by cold winds or belated blizzards ; but, even when this happened, the sun was quick and sure to staunch all wounds inflicted, and to win back the earth to smiles and reassurance.

So Tiretta came actually to inhabit the beautiful haunted place so associated with his first enchantment. It was no fortuitous choice, of course, which had led him there, laden, for all his baggage, with one soldierly valise ; yet he had hardly hoped at the first to realise so easily and so compactly his scheme of opportunism. Now, if she came, he would be always on the spot to greet her—in what way circumstance must decide. His life, his whole happiness, was bound up in that chance : but would she come ? He had only Fanchette's hint to go upon. It might have been wholly unwarranted ; it might

have been actually designed to confine him to a given place, whereby the risk of meeting him elsewhere should be avoided. The thought necessarily suggested another : was *she*, actively or negatively, in collusion with her maid to procure such a fiasco ? He had again only Fanchette's admission for comfort. But Fanchette was a liar—he knew that instinctively. Still the girl had obviously sought to get rid of him, and the truth had been drawn from her only with reluctance. She would not have conceded even so much, unless the pressure of facts had been too strong for her to resist. On the other hand, she might have suggested the compromise entirely on her own responsibility, and with the intent, having definitely disposed of him, to keep the knowledge of his whereabouts a secret from her mistress.

That would be a stultifying development—in the lack of any. Yet what could he do now to counter such a design, if it existed ? He understood that for some reason Fanchette, always a capricious quantity, had joined the forces against him—at the instigation of what or whom—or by the tacit acquiescence of whom ? Not of her : his whole soul, his whole knowledge, rejected the thought of such shallowness, such treachery, on the part of one proved so incorruptible. They were inseparable affinities, bound by that subconscious compact, whose roots were in the mystery of the past. And then, if confirmation were needed, his pathetic

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dream ! This man of dreams, indeed, trusted their evidence beyond the most convincing that could be offered by any living witness. He had seen his love's eyes, once in that trance, once on the steps of the Madonna della Steccata, and had read therein a message of deathless fidelity. It was enough : he could not be mistaken : he would not wrong her or himself again by the shadow of one suspicion.

And yet, watching the passage of the fruitless hours, he would sometimes grow despondent, or angry with his own irresolution, or with the easy way in which he lent himself to the designs of his enemies. Would she ever come ? Then he would stand listening, as if he heard in the deep places of his heart the voice of his love crying to him to hasten and deliver her from the hostile forces by which she was watched and environed. That was the worst of all ; for what was he to do, how escape from the mesh of uncertainty in which he had involved himself ? To break from it now were to betray himself and her—to invite the very tragedy he had come here to avoid. Not to avoid for his own sake, for he was reckless ; but he must be wonderfully tender and considerate in all things which touched upon her wellbeing. For himself, he held his life lightly, lacking the reassurance which alone could give it a purpose and a value. He did not seem to care much what happened to him ; what precautions he took were really nominal. That Bissy should know him was of course inevitable ; yet there seemed no object in

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confessing himself to the boy—no object in anything in particular, indeed. It was that very indifference which was his unconscious safeguard. Where there is no atmosphere of concealment nobody suspects. He was accepted, generally, on his own showing, and, specifically, on his own merits.

Those were characteristic and sufficient. His mental suspense, his perpetual soul-hunger, never seemed to affect his winning attitude towards his surroundings. Outwardly he appeared that lovable, interested, oddly humorous creature who, endearing himself, without effort or design, to all about him, seemed troubled by no sense of responsibility towards anybody or anything in the world. He could not help himself there ; the faculty of ingratiating was native to him and quite unforced. But it is wrong to judge such qualities as necessarily superficial. Popularly, the sparkling surface speaks the shallow current : it is as true as to insist that beauty is only skin deep. There are many of these old saws that need re-casting. Is there no deep thinker who has his playful side ? It was sage Harcourt, was it not, whose “ half-awakened bards ” so offended the poet ? As to exteriority, one might say, with as true a proverbial sententiousness, that the pint bottle of champagne is not to be told from the magnum by its effervescence. The fact is that manner is no indication of matter, and that some men can jest under torture while others cannot. It is just a

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question of constitution. Think of Keats, confined in quarantine on his death journey, desperately summoning up more puns in a week than he had ever been guilty of in a year. So, as il Signor Talé loitered in the wakening gardens, asking innumerable questions, making innumerable impracticable suggestions, delightedly absorbed, to all appearance, in floricultural lore, no one might have guessed from those rising bubbles the darkness of the tragic deeps from which they ascended.

These, to be sure, with whom he lived were simple country folk, unsophisticated save in the one direction of their business, and little apt at reading character. They were quite ready to accept him for what he palpably was—a charming and profitable addition to their *ménage*—without puzzling their brains as to what he might be. Parma was almost *terra incognita* to them : it was ten miles away—it might have been a hundred, for any influence it bore upon their lives. The pulse-beats of it came to them like a sound of bells so distant as to seem no more than a pleasing rumour. They were indifferently interested in its events ; hardly more so in its personalities. Once or twice the dead duchess was mentioned among them ; but chiefly, it seemed, because she was associated with their local experience. Tiretta gathered that her memory was respected, though with some reserve due to the not yet forgotten resentment against the Spanish occupation. But with Isabella it was different. They all loved

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the young Infanta, so sweet, so natural, so prettily friendly. The visitor, cunning man, found no difficulty in “drawing” them on that subject, though, for net result, he learned no more of her than he knew already. They were quite uninformed as to the general march of events, knew nothing about the proposed Austrian alliance, were as unworldly disposed as though to their minds it was all wilderness outside this their garden of Eden. He could have found their pastoral *naïveté* wonderfully refreshing, had the ferment in his mind been more amenable to such soothing influences ; as it was, he could at least endure it good-humouredly.

One day—it was the third after his arrival—he came upon Aquaviva busily employed over a number of little shrubs which he had just fetched out from their winter shelter. The sight brought a shock of colour to the visitor’s cheek, a rather wistful smile to his lips. What memory was here laid bare and bleeding ? It was like the disinterment of still breathing hope.

For some moments he watched the old man in silence. It was whimsically wonderful to him that the handling of these things should awaken no associations in that abstracted mind. Yet so it seemed. Not once had Aquaviva appeared, nor did he appear now, to connect him with any figure of the past. Presently Tiretta spoke :

“ What are those, mi’ amico ? ”

He waited intent on the unsuspecting answer :

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"They are basil-thyme, signore—little boudoir delicacies, which we cultivate for their scent. They will be very popular with the ladies when they flower."

"When will they flower?"

Aquaviva hunched his shoulders.

"Who can say? It may be this year or the next. They are capricious, and fastidious, but fat feeders when they like. Sometimes they like, and sometimes they do not. These have all had their christening."

"How do you mean their christening?"

Aquaviva leered round, with puckered lids, as he stooped.

"Blood, signore—good bullock's blood. They thrive on it."

"Will they not flower without?"

"They will flower; but it is all the difference between the weed and the exotic. So it is with human folks. We talk of blood in a man. It signifies nothing but generations of meat-eating, as against the minestra, the cabbage-soup, which the many, the nameless, have had to be content with for the replenishing of *their* veins."

"I see. It is the lord of many joints who is the lord of creation. And yet there is a virtue in blood. It can produce superior beauty as well as superior men."

"Wherefore the basil, signore, whose appetite, like the human, grows fiercer with what it feeds on,

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till nothing but the blood of men will appease it.”

“ Come, Aquaviva ! ”

“ So it is said, signore—of murdered men.”

“ Is that what your aristocrats here are delaying for ? ”

“ O ! they are young ; their tastes are not formed ; but I daresay a dose of it would facilitate their blossoming.”

Tiretta watched a little longer in silence, then turned and strolled away. It had been on his lips humorously to repeat a former challenge, to see if even that would succeed in evoking a response from a suddenly stimulated memory ; but something had prevented him at the last—a quick-springing emotion which urged him into search of solitude for its indulgence.

Inevitably his steps led him towards the orange-grove. They were never long from wandering in that direction—and not only because of the magical associations of the place. Elsewhere the gardens were but lately rising and expanding from their sober winter levels, and they afforded as yet but little cover for a would-be solitary spirit. But, for “ a green thought in a green shade ” there was always the hushed welcome of this deep windless sanctuary, and it was therein that he looked to find a solution of the perplexities that beset his present condition. He knew very well what form that expectancy conjured up ; it could not be but one in a spot so

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haunted. Here, if anywhere, he felt, the end would be decided.

The place was luminous now with young vivid gold and emerald ; no sound broke its silences save the running footsteps of the little river beyond, whose unseen glitter seemed actually vocal, splintering the misty limits of the grove as with spars and points of iridescent laughter. Tiretta, entering but a little way into that enchanted solitude, stopped abruptly, and gave rein to the thought he had brought in with him.

Could it be that death waited on their reunion ? He had only jested at the superstition on a former occasion : somehow now he did not feel inclined to jest at it. This pretty basil thing, which they had elected and consecrated for the symbol of their happiness ! Its flowering was to be the sign ; and when was it to flower ? Not yet, nor remotely, if it was to be judged by these others ; not even so soon as they, if Aquaviva had prophesied aright. And yet they had reached a crisis, whose solution, it seemed, must be a matter of days—of moments. The duke, if not arrived at Colorno already, was hourly expected. Why did she not come ?

And, at that very instant, aware of a stealthy step behind him, he turned and saw Bissy.

There was something in the boy's face, a suppressed emotion, a sort of furtive excitement, which startled and arrested him at once. Bissy carried a basket and a spud, with the latter of which, having

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deposited the former at a tree foot, he began to prod in an aimless way about the roots, obviously to give colour to some supposed business. Conscious of an odd unsteadiness in his feet, as if they had lost the sensation of contact with the ground, Tiretta approached the worker, and stood looking down.

“ What is that for, Bissy ? ” he said. “ To let in light and air ? ”

The boy did not answer for a moment ; then suddenly ceased digging, and stood up, leaning on his spud like a perspiring goblin. Once or twice he gulped ; and at last brought up resolution.

“ To let in light and air—the signor has said it,” he answered.

Tiretta studied him, a strange smile on his lips.

“ There is some mystery here,” he said low.

“ What is it, Bissy ? ”

“ It is of your own making, signore. It has never been of mine. If you wish me still to respect it, I shall do so in all dutifulness, understanding that there is no reason in the world why il Signor Talé should be interested in the arrival this moment of someone in the gardens.”

“ Of someone ! Of whom, Bissy ? ” His voice did not seem to himself to belong to him.

“ Of the owner of a little shoe I once pulled out of the mud, signore.”

“ Bissy ! ”

He was as pale as death ; he stood as if suddenly stricken mute. The boy, all honour to his elfin

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intelligence, showed his instant appreciation of the situation. He did not consider right or wrong ; it was enough that these two, his dearest patrons, wished to meet—for whatever reason was their own business.

“ Go through the grove, signore,” he whispered, “ to the little sward by the river. I will fetch her to come and look at my oranges. She has that *cagna* Fanchette with her, as sour and sullen as a duchess. But she shall not spy ; I will see to that. Go, signore ! ”

And Tiretta obeyed—a mere pawn at last in the game of this conquering strategist. He put his hand one moment on the squat shoulder, then turned and passed to his destiny. Ecstasy filled the air ; the voice of the little river rose jubilant to greet him ; he paused at last on that embowered isthmus amid the inviolable trees. Minutes passed ; his heart was beating to suffocation, and then—a quick light footfall—a quick febrile whisper :

“ Bonbec ! ”

CHAPTER XXIV

RAPTURE

“ IT is only for one hurried moment. I dare not stop. O, my heart beats so ! ”

He held her hands ; he gazed as if he could never fill the hunger of his soul ; for a minute he failed to speak. In all his passionate dreams he had never pictured her as returning to him like this—black clad—like an angel of death. The contrast between her lily complexion and the deep sadness of her robe was even startling. In his first glowing stupefaction, an odd thought hung like a mote in his mind—like a travelling speck under closed lids. It was a perplexed association of this mourning with something he had just been thinking about. With something—with what ? Dead men and green things that blossomed ! What was it ? He expanded his chest over the idleness of the fancy, easing it away in a great rapturous sigh. And then it came to him. The dead mother ! And he had been thinking only of dead love.

He drew her towards him without a word ; and she made no resistance. She lifted her face to his as he bent, and conceded to him all that he wished.

THE POT OF BASIL

“ Now ” he said deeply, “ it is all as if it had never been—these dark disastrous months. Shut your eyes, my soul’s beloved, and listen. Hark ! that was a bat that flew past : and do you hear the whispering wash of the moonlight against the trees, and the tiny crackle of the stars ? What is all this talk about a parting, to us who have never moved from this balcony where to-night we put an everlasting seal upon our love ? Have we been dreaming while we clung together ? Though it were a dream, Isabel, tell me I was not forgotten in it.”

“ They slandered you, dear love. Do you think I believed them ? ”

“ No more, lady, than I believed that you were happy in my banishment.”

In a passion of emotion she clung about his neck, laying her soft cheek to his bronzed one.

“ Let all the lies and the slanders go,” she whispered. “ They are not worth one thought from us. O, cancel them with these cruel months ! We have never left the balcony ; we have never been parted. There is no explanation needed from either of us to the other.”

“ Not one, Isabel. It was a dream.”

“ We have awakened from it to find the truth.”

“ Yes, awakened. Cling close, my soul, and whisper. Does the thought of to-morrow still terrify you ? ”

“ How can I help it ? O, my love, my love ! ”

“ Will you come with me now, away from all the

RAPTURE

stress and sorrow, into the wild white places where we can hide and be forgotten ? ”

“ Bonbec—not now ; it is impossible.”

“ To-morrow, then. I will have horses ready—I——”

“ I must not stay. My *gouvernante* is waiting for me in the road. To-night——”

“ Yes, to-night, Isabel ? ”

“ After the gates are shut. Come to the little wicket in the eastern wall. My maid will let you in.”

“ Fanchette ? ”

“ Ah, yes ! You know her.”

“ Enough to mistrust her. But if she is our friend——? ”

“ She is always her own best friend, I think. But she will be there.”

“ And I.”

“ You know the way ? ”

He held her apart, questioning with impassioned eagerness the face which drooped a little from his, its lids half closed, its cheeks just tinged with flame ; then bending, put his lips to the soft white rapture of the throat.

“ Isabel ! The little balcony above the myrtles ? ”

“ It is secret there. I must go—I dare not stop to say more—Bonbec, let me go. We can talk there alone, and decide what is best to be done. But not now.”

Lingeringly, reluctantly, he let her slip from his arms. She put a finger to her lips.

THE POT OF BASIL

“Stay here,” she whispered, with a radiant smile. And then once more she approached him, as if irresistibly, and looked with wistful ecstasy into his face.

“How thin and worn you are, dear love,” she said pitifully. “And yet, how can I wish you to have grieved less?”

Once more, moved beyond endurance, he caught her to his heart, and shamed the rosy colour to her lips and neck, until, gently upbraiding him, she broke away.

“Until to-night, soul of my soul,” he said.

The faithful Bissy was waiting for her in the grove. She kept him blithely chatting a little while, and then, hoping the best for her face, went on to rejoin her maid.

Fanchette acknowledged her reappearance as tart as crabs.

“I’m sure I wish,” she said, “that *I* could find in those trees the delight your Highness seems to borrow from them. Your Highness looks quite another person since making the little excursion.”

And in what, after all, had their enemies succeeded against these lovers? Surely was never such an impregnable perversity as their faith.

CHAPTER XXV

DELIRIUM

“THE balcony whence our Juliet leaned to whisper to her Romeo.” Do you recall how it was mentioned earlier, with wondering if in these days lunatics still came there to gibber to the moon? I say “still,” for if passion is the reverse of reason, then is not love a sort of madness? And were not these two demented things, to think that, in a chief province of despotism, love would be allowed to override all distinctions of rank and fortune? Or did they really think so, or think that disgrace and ostracism were the worst alternatives they had to face? What does it matter what they thought, or failed to think; their need was not in thinking; the fire of immortality is in the transcendent passions which take no thought, and of their seed is born all that beauty which redeems the ignoble materialism of the world.

At night all the eastern side of the palace, where it faced upon the sunk gardens, was veiled in deep shadow. Only in one place, above a secluded myrtle-grown terrace, a faintly luminous oblong showed where secret wakefulness kept still its vigil in a lighted room.

THE POT OF BASIL

The hangings in the window parted, revealing momentarily a running shaft of gold, and a man stepped forth, paused an instant on the balcony, then climbed its stone parapet and dropped to the turf beneath. Even as he alighted, another form, that of a "slim, enamoured, sweet-fleshed girl," appeared, catching light draperies about its neck and bosom, in the opening, and, letting the curtains fall to behind it, stood, ghostly-pale in the darkness, leaning down.

"O, love! You are not hurt?"

He laughed, low and musical. As she leaned, he could reach even up to her shoulders with his hands.

"Only in my vanity."

"O! why?"

"That I should have outstayed my welcome."

"Sweet, not your welcome, but my terror."

"Then, if I've outstayed it, your terror's gone?"

"Alas, no! This night has made it tenfold. It increases with every minute that you linger."

"Why, Isabel, what's to fear? All the world's asleep."

"Is there nothing to fear indeed?"

"Nothing, on my soul."

"Will you not go, dear love?"

"Not while you ask me. See how your voice holds me in its silken leash."

"I will not speak, then."

"So I shall know you weary of me? Well, I will go."

DELIRIUM

"No, stay a little. I cannot spare you to the dark. There is something fearful in it. The trees look as if they were watching us. Everything seems as if it draws near."

It was one of those crystal-clear nights which give the impression as of an unnaturally close approach of all objects, earthly and celestial. There was no moon, but every star was like a sharp splint of light cut upon a background of purple glass. Austere, immense, the inky masses of the ilexes seemed, in their apparent contiguity, as if their very shadows had taken root, filling the vacant spaces of the lawn between with menacing growth. A night when all things seemed to stop and listen, as in the deep-midmost of sleep when breathing almost ceases, and the soul hangs at the neutral poise between life and death.

"Even the stars," he said—"and most that beautiful bright one that stoops to guide us on our way. Look to the North, faint heart."

She caught his two wandering hands in hers, and, imprisoning them, brushed them with kisses as soft as flowers.

"Home," she whispered—" 'where the strange thing is'—where we can love and be good. O, sweet! I would you could sing to me!"

"Shall I sing?"

"It is not the time of nightingales. No, I dare not let you."

"As well, perhaps. I have been out of tune of late."

THE POT OF BASIL

“ Ah me ! Were you so sick at heart ? ”

“ Have I not told you ? ”

“ Tell it me all again a thousand times ; and a thousand times my tears shall drop like hot rain upon that winter, until not a speck of frost is left to upbraid me.”

“ It is already melted in your arms. O, love ! am I not a villain ? ”

“ If you are, I love a villain.”

“ Isabel ? ”

“ My dear lord ? ”

“ Think always well of that other.”

“ I obey my lord.”

“ He is a noble heart—princely, magnanimous. He deserves you more than I.”

“ Well, he has his deserts to keep him.”

“ His claim was open, palpable : mine, only visionary.”

“ I will think well of him—when I think of him. Look, when you turn that way, the stars make little babies in your eyes.”

“ Isabel, if it were not I, I think I could say, Make *him* happy.”

“ What do you mean, if it were not you ? O, God ! what have I done to forfeit my love ? ”

“ To *forfeit*, child ? ”

“ Have I been too forward, too complying—cheapening in myself the thing you held so dear ? Will you give me to him, as one having too easily betrayed her easy nature ? I am not like that—

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not fickle—indeed, indeed I am not. I will be cold, forbidding, if it please you ; more maidenly ; chary of my favours ; no smiles, no kisses—Ah, no, I cannot ! It is too late. In pity do not despise and cast me off ! ”

“ You very woman ! Come, bend lower. Give me your lips, I say.”

“ How can I help it when you bid me ? ”

“ My gentle slave ! What reprisals your fond loveliness does invite ! I could almost wound you just to taste that lust of dear submission. And yet, I did not mean to wound you, girl ; but only to say, were I to die, atone as best you can.”

“ As best I can, then. Shall I promise to marry him ? ”

“ Promise what you like.”

“ Ah ! now I hear you set your teeth, as if clinched on some secret pain. And I am happy once more. If you were to die, did you say ? ”

“ Yes, my own love.”

“ Look ! you cannot forbear the truth. Give him the empty husk, you mean, so long as the sweet kernel remains your own. You called me your own love.”

“ Are you not ? ”

“ By every fibre of my soul that clings to yours. How could I live, then, if you were dead ? ”

“ Make room. I must come up to you again.”

“ No, no—you shall not. I am content at last in

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everything but your safety. Hush—O, hush !
What was that noise ? ”

“ I heard none. Where is Fanchette ? ”

“ She is waiting within to take you to the gate.
Stop, while I fetch her.”

“ Not yet. Let me listen at your heart. Child,
how it beats.”

“ It is your own caged bird. It beats to get at
you.”

“ Come into my hand, dear bird, and lie warm
and rest. There is a long flight waits you on the
morrow.”

“ O, I die to think of it ! ”

“ What ?—of fear or rapture ? ”

“ Of rapture that is fear. Listen—Bonbec ! ”

“ It is midnight striking—the hour of sweet
augury. You will not fail me, will you, by a minute
—here, at the window ? ”

“ I will put the clock forward.”

“ If we can reach the mountains, and thence
make by way of Zurich across the German border,
and so northward.”

“ To the wild green gardens ! O, heaven
speed us ! ”

“ Never doubt it will. Think of my mascot.”

“ What mascot ? ”

“ That to which I owe my immortality—Cin-
derella’s slipper.”

Two arms came lovingly about his neck, and the
tiniest cooing laugh was smothered there.

DELIRIUM

"What tickles you, you rogue?"

"I do not know. It was either that or crying, and the laugh came first. Shall we not exchange talismans? My lord, will you give me your jack-boot to keep?"

"So you will wear it in your bosom. In very truth, Isabel, I should have died but for it."

"I believe—I am sure. Yet it did not save you this." Very pitifully her fingers fluttered over the scar on his temple. "Ah, love!" she sighed, "how could you leave me so?"

For a minute she held him close, with little murmurs like a dove; then looked up fearfully:

"The trees draw nearer. Is it not deadly still? Indeed you must be going."

"Well," he said: "shall we begin to speak good-bye?"

"O, no! the briefest parting. Must it not be so?"

"'Tis for you to say."

"I say it then. Bonbec?"

"Good-bye, lady!"

"One moment. There was something—one last thing I had to say. What was it? It has slipped my mind."

"Consider on it, while I hold you."

"It will come in a minute——"

"Or ten, or twenty."

"No; you must go. How prettily your hair grows from your forehead."

"Was that it?"

THE POT OF BASIL

"Wait! It is always on the tip of my tongue—yet it will not come."

"The basil-flower, perchance?"

"No. But let that serve. Was it not a strange dream of ours?"

"Not strange that I should come to you in dreams. It had been my practice, had you known. Shall I come again to-night? Sweetheart, do you call the basil by the name I told you?"

"Yes, Bonbec."

"A tiny whisper, faith! I'll whisper back. Isabel, we'll make the pretty darling flower between us yet."

So they lingered out their parting, postponing and always postponing the dread moment that was to separate them—to what issue? By ways of bliss and pain they had reached this supreme crisis, whence, if they would, the blind ecstatic plunge. Now, aware in truth that he must delay his going no longer, the man closed fast his arms about their enamoured burden, and spoke his last words very low and impassioned:

"Isabel—before I go—there is a thing to say. It is as a woman—do you realise it—that you lie here?"

"I would be anything, so to lie here for ever."

"So to lie and dream? But dreams must wake to reality, when childhood ends, as with the dropping of the flower comes the fruit. Are you prepared?"

"For what?"

"For what's to come?"

"Tell me what is to come."

DELIRIUM

"God knows! Only, for what it cannot be, think of all you must forego—name, honour, luxury—an empire."

"I thought them all shadows. Are they the realities?"

"Think, before you decide. The whole world against a sentiment."

"Is it only that, indeed, to you?"

"Ah! to me! But I lose nothing and gain all."

"An empty gain, when I shall have lost my all."

"It is the gain of the deathless, child. What is the value of the mortal residue to that?"

"So, after all, you think I cannot love like you?"

"O, I would prove my love, no more than that—even to this last renunciation! Do you fear? Then, I say, it is not too late yet to draw back."

She gave a little gasp, and would have withdrawn from him; but he caught at her hands and held them fast.

"Isabel!"

"O!" she said despairingly, "after all that has been between us."

"Listen to me. It is only to free you if you will, so that free you can choose."

"How can you hurt me so, when you say you love me? I would not be so cruel to my love."

"O, child, child! cannot you understand?"

She gazed at him a moment with impassioned eyes; then let herself slip once more into his arms.

THE POT OF BASIL

" I cannot lose you, Bonbec. No, not for all the world."

" Now," he said deeply, " the last is said ; and we are one and inseparable to eternity."

" Yes, to eternity ! "

" That I could have doubted you ! O, my soul, forgive me ! "

Presently she stirred, and, the starlight shining on her wet lashes, yielded herself to one last long kiss ; then gently put him from her.

" Good-bye, beloved—O, good-bye, good-bye ! "

" It is like death to leave you, Isabel."

" Then do not go. Come back—here, into my room—only till the day breaks. There is something fearful in the night. I feel as if, once we were parted, it will never give you to me again."

He laughed, whispering away her terrors.

" The dark is my true friend. How but for it could I creep back into hiding ? "

" The long, long way ! O, go warily, for fear of hateful things ! "

" Be comforted. I hold my life too dear. Send Fanchette to the little door. Remember—at midnight. The horses will be waiting."

" Bonbec ? "

" Yes, dearest ? "

" Call me your slave."

" My gentle, pretty slave, good-night : kiss the basil for us both."

" O, yes, yes ! "

CHAPTER XXVI

WITHIN THE PRESBYTERY

THE northernmost of the five gates of Parma discharged direct upon the highway that led to Colorno. At intervals from this *embouchure* came shooting as it were the *disjecta membra* of a disrupted State. Bodies of high functionaries, coach-loads of subsidiary officials, staffs civil and military, clerks, grooms, secretaries—mounted, perched in dancing carriages, or drawn heavily behind teams of ponderous Flanders mares, these and their like appeared issuing intermittingly all day from the open culvert, whence they rolled leisurely on their way towards that crystal oasis in the plains ten miles distant. The duke, in short, was changing house, and this anticipatory exodus, which looked like the decimation of his capital, represented no more after all than the adequate personnel of a great lord retiring upon a favoured sylvan retreat. So do our needs enlarge with our state, until, so far as self-help goes, we reach the condition of the paralytic. To Don Philip a fifth and sixth *valet de chambre* would have appeared more indispensable than a single knife and boot boy might appear to us.

At Colorno itself, connected with the city by this

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scattered procession of men and vehicles, the business of preparation was being pushed forward as assiduously as though the duke were visiting his summer residence for the first time. Everyone was in a state of agitation, and either tetchy or nervous, or both. Cook, lackey, chambermaid and the rest—they seemed all overtaken, as those roused ones in the sleeping palace might have been, by a vague sense of guilt, and a feverish desire to make up by haste for something unaccountably lost—was it a minute or a hundred years? A general air of rush and panic pervaded the place, extending itself from garret to basement, and affecting the marquise in her *salon* no less than the little mop-squeezer whitening the boards in her attic. They felt the change in their blood like the first irritating processes of a tonic drug.

Madame herself was as obstreperous and intolerable as, in their excitement, she found her young charges. She waxed shrilly voluble over the information that Isabella was confined to her rooms with a headache. It was monstrous, unnatural, she cried, thus to shut herself away in the face of this imminent arrival, to dissociate herself from the atmosphere of general rejoicing that prevailed. Her relations with the Infanta had long been strained; she was never so gratified as when she could cite evidence of unnaturalness against this natural soul. It is always for such as she to suspect hypocrisy in what is purely genuine.

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"Like mistress like Nan." Amongst those rendered especially captious by the coming event was to be numbered, it seemed, Mademoiselle Becquet. Fanchette bristled with spines; it was dangerous to touch her—almost to approach. Propitiation only appeared to feed her choler, as oil fire. She screamed at her inferiors; was insolent and defiant towards authority, defending her mistress against the charge of undutifulness with a fury which ended by actually routing that formidable autocrat, the utterer of the slander. She was in that state, it appeared, to which we are all, whether Fanchettes or otherwise, occasionally subject, when our whole nervous system seems transferred, like Hartley Coleridge's fantastic skeleton, to the outside of us, for every breath, however softly sympathetic, to gall. Now a tempest of voice and whisking petticoats, now a white rush of tears into solitudes which gave no relief, she was eternally on the move, and eternally inviting retort for the sake of retaliating on it tooth and claw. She left her mark, indeed, on one over-confident gallant, who derisively offered to confess and absolve her for the nominal penance of a kiss. Her nails ploughed a furrow in his cheek which it would take a month to obliterate. As he stood cursing and ruefully laughing, the sight of the running blood appeared for the first time to sober her. She stood gazing at it fascinated; then suddenly, putting her hands to her face, turned and

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ran. Whither she disappeared none cared to know or enquire ; it was comfort enough that the wild-cat had retreated for the time being to its fastnesses.

She did not issue from them again until late in the afternoon, and then only upon receipt of a private communication from a correspondent, which was put into her hand by an emissary sent to seek her for the purpose. She was in the Infanta's rooms, but not with her mistress, when the message that someone awaited her without, on particular business, reached her. The shrinking page who delivered it could not but observe how her cheeks blenched at the word. He could not but marvel, moreover, after recent storms, at the apparent tranquillity with which she accepted it. She asked him, with an affectation of carelessness, where the messenger was to be found, and, learning that it was at that door into the corridor where she had once before encountered Tiretta, dismissed him with a smile and a pretty *vifs remerciements* that made his heart throb. Then, when he was well gone, she rose—a little unsteadily.

A wave of blood seemed to sweep through her brain, making her momentarily giddy. She put out a hand to a chair-back, and stood supporting herself. It had come—but only what she had expected, looked for. She was desperately pledged to the issue, and there was no escape from it at this last. It was even a relief to her to be called from the horrible suspense of inaction. Suddenly the memory of that crimson streak she had torn upon the insolent

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face returned to her. A red light came to her eyes ; the blood-ensign of " women who love brave men," in Bissy's creed. She was not going to falter now, or be untrue to her ideal of manliness. Besides, the end justified the means. Taking herself forcibly in hand, she went down the stairs to the door into the corridor.

This was a deserted part of the building, and now even unwontedly quiet by reason of the Infanta's desire for repose. Thus, and for such purpose, to take advantage of its abandonment might have seemed a double treachery to some people. Such moral niceties were beyond Fanchette's appreciation. She descended softly and found a man at the door.

He was a strong truculent-looking fellow, unknown to her — swagger in his attitude, an inhuman animalism in his small sunken eyes and bushy-bearded face, on which a thick smear of lip stood prominent. She had had no personal intercourse with his kind ; but the hall-mark of the *assassino-prezzolato* was stamped on his every feature. He was well enough dressed to pass for a *fanfaron* ; but she knew, without seeing them, what there was under his cloak to point the moral of his trade. Face to face with the loathly thing she had helped to call into being, a revulsion against her own bestial weapons seized her. This brute to hold a fine destiny in his hands ! Her narrow lips went up, as in the presence of something physically offensive. She had no fear for herself—not an atom.

THE POT OF BASIL

The man swept off his hat with a leer, that in its suggestion of hidden confidences was fulsome. He produced and handed to her a little folded tuck of paper.

“Un’ lettera amorosa, signora,” he said, in rather guttural Italian, his nose wrinkling. “The sender awaits a reply.”

She plucked the thing apart, and, barely glancing at its message, crumpled it in her hand, and answered :

“Tell him I will come.”

He grinned, saluted her again, and swaggered off. She could have called upon heaven then and there to strike him dead. That her nature must be thus subdued to what it worked in, not like the “dyer’s” but like the butcher’s hand—be claimed to an affinity with this abomination ! It was horrible. Yet so her own compliance had decreed it. Henceforth and for all time he was her loathed confederate, and by reason of that understanding her master. Her hands might be purely white and her little feet as playful as a lamb’s : for all that lay hidden between she was the foul bonds slave of blood.

Now, a conscious corruption, the vindictive termagant to her own debasement, she did not hesitate, but, having hurriedly veiled herself, went off to the assignation demanded. She repudiated all responsibility for what was to follow. She had done all that was humanly possible to warn a madman away from the certain consequences of his rashness,

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and, as he would not be warned, she had no choice but to fulfil her own destiny as a contributor to those consequences. She let herself go as the devil listed.

Her way lay to the presbytery, as seemed fitting to the unities of this tragedy, which had first claimed her there to be its victim and tool. The streets were full of the bustle and animation of returning life, but the precincts of the church were deserted. She mounted the steps to the silent house, and knocked on the door, which was opened almost immediately by Gaspere.

The old rascal peered at her curiously a moment ; then, putting out a lean hand, drew her swiftly within.

“ His reverence ? ” she muttered, half choking.

He sniggered. “ He is out visiting the sick. But —non importa : you will discover all you need in the parlour.”

He motioned her thither, opened the door, pushed her in, and, closing the latch, retreated. He was too deaf to make eavesdropping profitable.

The room was sombre and almost empty of furniture and other appointments. Its most noticeable feature was a crucifix of ebony and ivory standing in the middle of the one bare table. A melancholy shaft of light, falling through the dusty window, touched the white figure on the cross with a startling radiance. Fanchette shrunk back.

“ Why did you bring me here ? ” she whispered.

THE POT OF BASIL

La Coque, stealing from the shadows, stood before her.

“ I did not wish my coming to be known. What is to be done must be done with promptitude and in secrecy. We are playing a part, do you understand, and the actors in it must not appear on the stage until the eventful moment ? Else, suspecting the plot, those antagonistic to it may cause its mis-carriage.”

Hearing a little gasp come from her, he bent as if to look searchingly in her face, and put a hand towards her shoulder ; but she repulsed him.

“ Why should I be dragged into it ? ” she said.

“ Dragged ! ” He drew himself up, as if realising timely what he had to encounter. “ Were you not the first to volunteer ? ”

“ I told you he had returned, that was all.”

“ Was that all ? ”

“ That he was in hiding in the neighbourhood.”

“ Yes : go on.”

“ There is no more.”

“ Not that they met in the gardens of Aquaviva : not that last night you let him in and out of the wicket in the eastern wall : not that he will come again this night—with what purpose—but it will never be fulfilled ? ”

“ My God ! How do you know ? ”

“ Simple deduction, my Fanchette. You know the proverb, ‘ A nod for a wise man and a rod for a fool.’ I have had my instruments at work since the

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first hint. There are horses ordered for to-night. Did you know that ? ”

“ No.”

“ I do not doubt you. Let her thank providence, that’s all, that she has sharper wits plotting to save her.”

“ Save her, then, but spare him.”

“ Do you say it ? Why do you want him spared ? ”

“ For her sake only. What harm has she ever done me ? ”

“ There are some growths — infatuation, for example—that can only be treated with the surgeon’s knife.”

“ O, my God ! ”

“ You cannot reduce them so long as the root cause remains. Do you realise where we stand in this ? At the fork of two roads—disgrace or an empire. A life, one mean poor life, must count for nothing in the decision.”

“ You always hated him.”

“ If I did, it was because of you.”

“ Yet you do not consider me in your vengeance. If it must be, why do you not act alone ? ”

“ Because, only with your help can we save the face of things.”

“ Go on. I am listening.”

“ Very well. You will let him in at the wicket, and I shall come upon you together.”

“ I see. A quarrel between you two about your mistress.”

THE POT OF BASIL

" You are sharp enough when you will."

" So you gamble with my good name, which is after all nothing to you."

" On the contrary. His blood shall prove its particular value."

" Blood ! " She seemed to gulp ; then whispered on hoarsely : " will there be much blood ? "

" You need not wait to see."

For some moments she stood silent, staring at him as if fascinated.

" Charlot," she said, " if I do what you want, will you marry me ? "

" We will see."

" I think there is good cause."

" Very well, we will see."

" I shall be ruined with my mistress."

" The duke will find you compensation."

" The duke ! Does he know ? "

" He knows, and approves."

" Approves ? "

" Thunder of God ! How do you suppose he regards this outrage to his pride, this abuse of his love ? A common adventurer, a mere tavern-thrummer, without voice or standing—and to practise his damned arts on the very soil of a newly-turned grave ! Whatever tolerance was shown him once is over and done with. He stands sentenced like a poaching dog. O, be sure the duke is in it ! "

" What if it be too late ? "

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"Too late?" He made a step, and gripped her arm. "They are not gone already?"

"Not that. But for an hour they were alone together last night."

He gave a deep sigh, and dropped his hold.

"It is never too late there. But I trust the vestal in her—and his own discretion. An hour is nothing. You must besiege these shy fortresses a week before they surrender."

"Then I will not be a party to his murder."

"You will not?"

"What harm has he done that cannot be mended?"

"Alive, he'll do it yet."

"I'll not help to hurt him."

"You'll do better to think again."

"Why, better?"

"Lest you be made to take his place."

"What! You'll kill me!"

"Not I, unless I kill my love with kindness. But I cannot save you now your knowledge of another's secret. Be sure, if your scruples refuse a part in it, means will be taken to keep it fast in you."

"The duke will have me poisoned?"

"Who said the duke?"

"O, how I hate you all!"

From the first he had foreseen what must come, and had been prepared for it. He saw imminent at last the hysterical collapse long threatened, and the look of the dog came to his face. His teeth showed;

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tight puckers gathered over his eyebrows ; he held her with a glare as he moved on her. With a little sob, half terror, half defiance, she struck out at him—and on the instant he had her in his grip. His sinews, for all his slight build, were like thongs of steel ; her mad struggles availed nothing against their vicious devilry. She made no tumult, uttered no scream ; but in silence fought and writhed, biting at his hands, at his clothes, at anything, until, falling upon her knees, he had her, torn and dishevelled, at his mercy. He showed her none. Seizing her by the ears, by her tumbled hair, he forced her head back, and, snarling, put his knee against her throat. Presently her struggles weakened, grew spasmodic, and a desperate imploring look came to her eyes. Then—for he knew his lady—relaxing the pressure, and releasing his right hand, he felt on the table behind him for a riding switch he had laid there, and, holding her down with his left, applied it furiously to her shoulders. One of them had been wrenched bare in the tussle ; he did not spare the naked flesh for that, but rather lusted to see it quiver and crimson under his blows. And all the time she made no outcry—that was the strange thing—but only writhed and shrunk away, with now and then a panting sob or a quicker gasp when a crueller cut went home. And at the end, when, his fury spent, he ceased, looking, with hard breathing, down upon her—lo and behold, she flung convulsive arms about his knees, and, with the released tears running down

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her cheeks, put her head against him, like a poor conscience-guilty dog begging pardon. Surely the immortal thing in woman's love is its illogicalness.

La Coque knew his lady, I say ; he took the satisfaction of a tyrant in making her know him. He did not spurn her now, but he stood unmoved and unmoving.

"Get to your feet," he said : "do you hear ?"

She obeyed and stood before him, a woeful girl, streaked and torn by his brutality, waiting breathless on his word.

"Have you come to your senses ?" he demanded.

"Yes—Charlot." Her voice still caught in sobs, though she tried to command it.

"Will you do what I tell you ?"

"Yes."

"That is well at last. Now mark your instructions. Come here—bend your head to me. There will be two of us ; we shall be waiting in the sunk garden, in the shadows of the trees below the terrace, but not in sight of it. Lead him that way from the wicket ; it is very private. Before you pass, I shall step out and challenge you both. There will be an altercation between us, as much to take him off his guard as for the benefit of the witness lurking in the background. It is he, you understand, who is brought to testify to the real cause of quarrel—such as he thinks it already—a dispute about you. He will do what he is hired to do while

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we wrangle ; but by then, if you wish it, you may have escaped. Is it all clear ? ”

“ Yes, quite.”

“ And you will not fail me ? ”

“ No.”

He searched her quivering face, with its heavy eyelids, all wet and swollen, intently for a little ; then softly touched one of the poor ears he had so cruelly ill-used.

“ Ma pauvre petite ! ” he said pitifully : “ ma pauvre petite ! ”

The sobs came faster and thicker ; he drew her gently towards him, and whispered :

“ Why would you rouse the devil in me ? Did it hurt so much ? ”

She clung about his neck.

“ Come,” he said : “ let’s sit yonder. There’s no one in the house but Gaspare.” With lips like salve he touched the wounded flesh. “ Chère amie—Fanchette—no, I’ll not loose you ! ”

Over his shoulder the white figure on the cross blazed in her opened eyes.

“ Not here,” she whispered, hurried and febrile—
“ not here. Take me where he cannot see us.”

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CRY IN THE GARDEN

THE clocks were pointing near to midnight ; the village was long silent ; the flurry of the day had subsided everywhere, and sleep and quiet had usurped throughout the palace the place of tumult. Only in that one remote corner above the terrace, where the bridal myrtles grew, was a shrouded light still burning, unquenchable, it seemed, as the steadfast spark that glows before a shrine. And there was the young wakeful postulant for Love's service, awaiting, half rapt, half fearful, the mystic call.

Somewhere in the shadows there was a watch ticking. Its tiny pulse beat out the seconds in a fury to outstrip the lagging hours ; for it had been worn near its mistress's heart, and the throb of its hairspring had fallen into time with the fever of impatience it had touched there. But at length the end was in sight, and the round of long-drawn minutes rolled up to the starward-pointing hands. Isabella's own hands were cold, as she lifted for the last time the little restless engine to consult it.

All day she had lived for this moment that was near. Truthful as she could not but be, her headache had served her for no guileful pretext ; but it

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had served her nevertheless, since it was solitude she craved. She had some things to do—not many, but essential : to write a letter to her father was one of them. And she wrote it from her simple heart—a little plea so pathetic, so impossible, that it might well have wrung a colder breast than his. Perhaps it affected him when he came to read it ; for he was not uncompassionate when the end was gained. But of that we have no knowledge.

There were some jewels she would take with her—indisputably her own. She would not come to her lover empty-handed, to be a burden on his charity. But the part of Jessica was impossible to her, and she robbed no one.

At this last she had only herself, for all vital purposes, to depend on. Fanchette, whom alone it had once been possible to take into her confidence—Fanchette, the fallen and unclean in her eyes, was no longer an auxiliary to be trusted with other than the material aids to these meetings. For the purer, finer sympathies she was necessarily disqualified. Isabella blamed herself for this judgment, for what was she herself better than Fanchette, save in the constitution of her passion ? Yet surely that alone redeemed her ; for love to her was nine-tenths a spiritual ecstasy, and only the little residue the mortal drug to achieve it. For all the best it meant to her, she could have been content to play St. Catherine to the pure divinity in love.

Well, we may doubt ; but she was chaste, at

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least—chaste in the sense of utter truth to one supreme ideal. This man was her God, to whom she had given herself body and soul ; and if earthly passion was a detail of that surrender, there is no use or profit in calculating its proportion to the whole.

Now, all things prepared, she set herself to abide, with what patience she might, the weariful interval. But first she took off her betrothal ring, and looking at it remorsefully a moment, placed it gently with the letter on her dressing-table. Often during the long day she would caress her basil, and speak to it as if it were a sentient thing, and chide it for its too tardy blossoming. It was not keeping faith, she said ; for surely now the longed-for hour of their union was approaching, and yet its stubborn little twigs remained tight-closed. All day she would hear, faint and afar, the low thunder of life returning to deserted rooms and echoing corridors ; and, listening, was conscious of an already strange sense of detachment from the world of her knowledge. She could think of it tenderly, kindly, but without one emotion of regret for its loss. There had never been that in common between them which a first glimpse of the eternal truth of things could not dissipate ; and truth had come to her, when it did, in a transcendent form. Her soul stood on tiptoe, foreseeing only the moment when love was to call it to the starry altitudes.

Night, when it fell at last, came with a little

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moaning wind, which ever seemed to grow in fitful spasms as silence deep and deeper settled on the house. Listening, she seemed to hear without a sound of small voluble voices, and little footsteps running like pattering leaves, and giggling laughter that caught at her heart with fear. But it was nothing—only the mad spirits of the dark taking toll of the unrest which served to cover their antics. In the pauses of the wind they would all stop as still as mice ; and then again, when the blast rose high, stir its shrill volume with their bodiless cries.

They were nothing ; but to over-tense nerves the voices of nothingness are the sounds most ill to endure. And so poor Isabel found them—terrifying, inscrutable, until she could bear to be alone no longer. Better the company of the restless night itself than this vigil of haunted loneliness behind enshrouding curtains. As the great castle clock chimed eleven, she left her upper chambers, and stole down soft-footed to the fateful room whence she was to make her flight.

She had only to wait and bide the moment—only to wait ! But Fanchette had had her sure instructions, and what else was there for her herself to do ? Only to wait. She extinguished the solitary light, and, putting aside the hangings, stood looking out into the darkness.

It was profound among the masses of the ilex trees ; yet overhead there was still a cold shine of stars. The wind came on in heavy gusts, swaying

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the black-heaped shadows, so that they seemed to distort themselves, mouthing and mowing like chaotic giants. She did not dread them as she had the unreal voices, not even when their movement seemed momentarily to betray the presence of odd white-faced things crouched within their glooms. But these were tangible, at least—tricks of fancy that one could grapple and defy. Gradually all sense of them faded as she stood, and she lost herself in glowing dreams.

The striking of the third quarter brought her with a shock to herself. Even as the resonant jangle ceased on the instant, cut off by a swooping blast, she could have thought she heard through the tumult a faint sound of wrangling voices, very distant, inarticulate, not to be detached from the general confusion ; but it ceased as the wind fell ; and she told herself that her fancy had again deceived her. But not for long now. Her whole soul thrilled in the thought of the rapturous reality that second by second must be approaching to claim her for its own.

Suddenly an intense feeling of awe came over her—a thrill of hushed expectancy, as in that solemn moment of the Mass when the Host is elevated above the bowed and death-still congregation. Her eyes were on the velvet spaces—out of their silences dripped a sudden star, which, descending slowly, disappeared behind the trees.

And on the instant there came a woman's scream,

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harrowing, heart-piercing, rending the darkness. Once, and fainter, it was repeated ; and then the wind took up the tale of fear and swept it onwards into obliteration.

The watcher stood as if stricken into stone, all the blood in her body draining back upon her heart. No fancy—there could be none, in that horrible cry. Who had uttered it—and whence ? It had come from the direction of the trees, down by the garden edge—O, God ! O, God !—his time, his path !

She leapt as one from the brink of the grave, called back to the solace of some infinite pain. He was there ; he needed her. Without an instant's hesitation she climbed the little balcony, and falling anyhow upon the turf beneath, rose to her feet and ran. She ran down the terrace, across the sloping sward, a small white spectre against the towering blackness of the trees. Her feet sparkled in the inky pools ; the wind charged at her, and tore loose a wild strand of hair ; it was a figure to haunt those glades for evermore. She ran and ran, making straight in the direction of the sound. As she skirted the plantation edge, she seemed conscious of shadowy forms swiftly glimpsing and disappearing among the trees. She heeded nothing of them, of their flittings and sibilations. Real or unreal, of what importance were they any longer in this context of death ? For it was death, and the end of all things. She never doubted it ; it was in her

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soul as she ran. That scream had shattered at one blow the whole rainbow fabric of their love's illusion. It could not be, it could never have been, by human consent. Only by way of this agony was it possible for the heaven of their dreams to come true. Down among the flowery paths she stopped suddenly, and fell upon her knees beside him.

He was lying crushed into the green border—there, in that very place where the love-in-a-mist was wont to grow so thickly. It was quiet in this sunken spot—no sound but the bubbling, it seemed, of a low spring. It came from his lungs, God pity her, and ran over his lips. “Beloved!” she sighed in a little voice; but all hopeless heart-break was in it.

With the intense vision of subconsciousness she could distinguish, as surely as if it were daylight, every detail of his face. His eyes were closed; but she knew he was not dead. Would he die without recognising her? She put an arm beneath his head and tried to lift it to her bosom.

“Not without one word!” she said, with a small wooing moan. “It is only you and I.”

And at that, struggling back from the shadows, he raised leaden lids, and knowing her, faintly smiled. She tore a handkerchief from her breast, a little perfumed scrap of lace and cambric, and with it tried to staunch the gushing life. And then she bent her face, to catch the gasping words:

“What is it, most dear, most dear?”

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“ Believe nothing—only my deathless love.”

“ And mine—O, and mine ! ”

His left arm crooked feebly a moment, and then fell. A spasm of scorn twitched his dying features :

“ In the back—there were three of them—and one a woman.”

Again the murmur tailed off and ceased. In a numb agony she spoke the name that was only hers. “ Take me with you,” she whispered, with a quivering sigh : “ O, take me, take me with you ! ”

And then suddenly and strongly he rose in her arms, and an unearthly light, great and triumphant, was in his eyes, and he spoke with a clear voice :

“ Sweet—in the North—in the beautiful gardens—we shall meet in three——”

The blood rushed from his mouth ; a slight convulsion shook him ; he fell back. They found her—they, the shameful ones, when they slunk presently from their ghastly ambush—clinging insensible to the lifeless body.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A POSTHUMOUS EXISTENCE

“ And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze ;
She had no knowledge when the day was done,
And the new moon she saw not : but in peace
Hung over her sweet basil ever more,
And moistened it with tears unto the core.”

IN that strange long sleep of swoons and haunted wakings there was a dream she had. Something had always troubled her—a sense of something left undone, on the fulfilment of which a rapturous tryst depended. It was associated with a promise, which yet was a promise conditional on something to be performed. At first, in her half-lucid intervals, she had been content to lie quite still and resigned, secure in the thought that no more than the third day was needed to see her broken heart made whole in the transport of a swift re-union ; but the day came and passed, and she was still lying unreleased in the quiet room. Why was it so ? She had made so sure of the promise, and yet the sign had been withheld. Weak tears dropped from her eyes. If not three days, then what ? Soon it must be, in this

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state of bodily and mental prostration into which she was fallen. But when? O, death had been cruel to cut short and confound that message in the very moment of its utterance! If only she could know, she could endure.

And then came the dream—or so it seemed. She thought that once, quite suddenly and blissfully enlightened, she rose in the sweet clear morning, when all her watchers were asleep, and, descending the stairs softly, passed out into the gardens by way of a door that had been strangely left unlocked. Then swiftly her bare feet were on the dewy grass, and she was running. She ran down by the trees to that place of delirious memory, and there were the crushed flowers and the trampled ground to convince her of the truth of what had been. The spot, it seemed, had been avoided since, and only a hurried attempt had been made to obliterate the traces of the tragedy. But deep in the bushes she saw half-hidden what she had come to seek—what she had never doubted that she should find—a little blood-soaked handkerchief. She had cast it from her when she had clasped him at the last.

Hurriedly she secured her prize, and, kissing it, hid it in her bosom. The blood had dried upon it, and it left no mark upon her lips. She turned and ran again.

She thought, then, that she was back undiscovered in her room; and that she went to her basil pot, and with little labour coaxing the sweet thing whole from

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its nest, laid the handkerchief in the void and therein replaced the plant, burying her secret out of sight. And so, dropping tears upon its leaves, she went again to lie in her bed, trembling in a very ecstasy of reassurance. She had solved the heart-haunting mystery. It would blossom now.

When they came to wait upon her she was asleep. She slept as she had not done as yet. The burden of that riddle once lifted, nature must have its way with her. When she awoke at last, it was to a sense of peace such as she had not known for days.

She was convalescent. The grave physicians said so, congratulating her discreetly on her recovery. From what? Something malarial, or tertian, probably. Her constitution had been tried by the strain of recent events—the obsequies, and so on. And so on. What did it matter if they knew—if anybody knew? She was only in a fever to substantiate her dream; and the moment she was left alone, she rose to do so.

She was very weak; her eyes were unearthly bright; there was a pain upon her heart. Those were all very well, and dearly well, if only her dream would yield the thing she prayed of it. When she was convinced it was there, she wept for very joy. It was truly there, indeed—no need to trouble how it was brought, whether in a dreaming or a waking trance. The end was assured, and the promise would be fulfilled.

Thenceforth, physically, indeed, she was restored.

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The restfulness engendered by that assurance helped her body's healing. She felt it so herself, but without uneasiness for the result. What was to be was written, and no fretting could either alter or anticipate the end. In the meantime, untrammelled by material pains and weaknesses, her spirit was free to soar into those regions where life and love awaited it. This lower state had ceased of any meaning for her ; like the dying poet of that other Isabella, she felt conscious somehow of leading a posthumous existence—as if her real self were elsewhere, blissfully sleeping out the hours, like the dead Adonis, until the appointed moment when Love should wake it.

This sense of detachment was so absolute as to deceive her father into a belief in her complete resignation to what had happened and was destined to happen. She had been mad and was sane ; but being so, he had no desire to torture a point which, with her convalescence, had ceased to be material. She awoke one morning to see him standing at her bed-foot. He stood stiff-necked, immovable, searching her face with his inquisitorial Spanish eyes.

Presently he stirred, and coming round the bed, lifted the pale slender hand that lay upon the coverlet, and, slipping a ring upon its betrothal finger, stood, retaining his hold, silently looking down.

She smiled at him, then, and spoke, a little faintly :
“ Si, mio padre. It shall remain there.”

No mention of the letter : none of the crisis that

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had produced it. The act and the look were sufficient in themselves to cover the whole of the situation—regret for a stern necessity, forgiveness for an unspeakable offence, assurance that thenceforth all would be overlooked and forgotten in the promise of reparation. He might have gone then, satisfied ; but in some redeeming impulse of emotion he put the little fingers to his lips before he replaced them gently on the coverlet. And, as he went, Isabella turned her face to the wall, and wept. She felt no resentment towards him for what he had done, or caused to be done, but only an infinite pity. He did not know ; he could never know. Her reparation was only nominal ; for what had she to give at last other than the mere mechanism of a being which his own act had deprived of its essential meaning, and which must soon perish for lack of that vitalising principle ? Her soul was already with her love ; only her body remained for insensible submission to those brief mortal uses which men might desire of it.

She came downstairs after that, and resumed her formal existence. There was something gone from her, but it was of too subtle an essence to affect the common mind with a sense of definite loss. What suspicion of the truth was abroad she did not know or care to know. She was like one regarding in herself the unfamiliar antics of a stranger. They did not much concern or interest her, either introspectively or in their visible relations to their surroundings. But she was very sweet and gentle with

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all ; for the habit of kindness remained to the desolated heart, the scent of the roses still clung round the broken vase. Only the old spirit of merriment seemed to have deserted her for ever. No laugh was once again heard on her lips.

Regarding so little of the past, it was not strange that she never referred to her vanished chief *femme de confiance*, or appeared to notice that she was deprived of her services. It is even possible that Fanchette might have resumed her place at her side without exciting any repulsion in her. She seemed to bear no one a grudge for what had been, or to discriminate between this and the other in the ruin which had befallen her. She may have surmised who were the chief instruments in that tragedy ; she never betrayed by word or look her knowledge of them. It was not their guilt which was the poignant thing ; it was the irreparable loss it had entailed on humanity. One did not condemn a viper because it achieved its nature as much in biting the heel of a saint as of a sinner. That all-sweet absence of the spirit of revenge ; that utter absorption in the effects of the deed and noble contempt for its perpetrators, should have been felt by base minds as more crushing than any retaliation. Perhaps it was. Neither la Coque nor Mademoiselle Becquet was to be found at Colorno in these days.

And the mortal body of her tragedy ? She never learnt or tried to learn where they had laid it. What did it signify ? That poor broken prison was no

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more concerned now with the ideals which had once made it animate and beautiful than was her own body with the little mortal lusts and policies which contended over its brief possession. To all that its life-tribute meant to her at last the basil contained the clue.

It was there alone her real being centred and became volitional. Alone with it, her soul seemed to return into her from the spaces where it had hung aloof, and to become articulate with a remembered ecstasy. She would dream with the green thing, and talk softly with it, as if it were he himself, recalling a hundred little secrets of love and loving converse. "She had no knowledge when the day was done," but only that the darkness meant the joyful nearing of her basil-time. And always and for ever she prayed it wooingly to flower, growing more pathetic in her sweet entreaties as the third month from that night drew to its close. But still the stubborn sprays showed no sign of breaking—not for all her tender complaints and bedewing tears.

Alas, it was not to be yet !

CHAPTER XXIX

AT REST

“ Sound mournfully upon the winds and low ;
For simple Isabel is soon to be
Among the dead . . . ”

SHE was married early in September. When she had been told that it was to be, she had simply acquiesced, quite quietly, quite gravely. “ To make *him* happy ”—she had not forgotten the wistful words—almost his last—and the withholding of the sign was proof that the sacred injunction was not rescinded. If his dear ghost still held her to that sacrifice, there must be reasons for it hidden among the inscrutable silences. Perhaps that way alone lay the end she so wearied for. If this poor residue from all which exalted life above its material perishableness was enough for Joseph’s content, she valued it too little to grudge it him. Let him be happy with it, if he would and could.

And so she was married, quite quietly, as befitted her mourning, in the ducal palace at Parma. The ceremony was performed by proxy, the Prince of Liechtenstein representing his royal master, and immediately following it the new archduchess set

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out for Vienna. It is enough for our remaining purpose to record the whole-heartedness of her reception there by that susceptible young man, her husband, who had only once before in his life seen the face which was now to awaken in him the liveliest emotions of love. Isabella much more than justified the archduke's earlier impression of her : he found her beautiful and desirable beyond all expectation, and he laid his soul then and there at her feet, with assurances of its eternal dedication to her love and service.

Eternity was a big, sad word in that connection of expediency, and tragic, because it could never be more than a one-sided compact. She had nothing but a temporal gift to offer him in exchange for it, but she lent to that what grace she could through the pathetic sweetness of its giving. He deserved only kindness of her ; *he* had had no voice, no hand, no knowledge, in the deed which had been his gain. And what a little gain, after all ! It seemed hardly worth all this plotting, all this wreck of lives and ruin of souls to end on such a paltry acquisition. It were as though a party of musicians had fought for the possession of a delicate instrument, with which in the meantime they had been belabouring one another.

It is said that on the bridal evening, when left alone together in their room, the young wife turned to her husband with some expression of this thought upon her lips. She had been looking from the

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window, into the blown star-lit darknesses of a night such as that which had imprinted for ever its death-shadow upon her soul, and the emotion of that piteous memory was alive and terrible in her. She looked into his face, an intense and appealing sadness in her own, and clasping her hands as if in prayer, spoke to him :

“ I will try to be to you a good wife, during the three years we shall remain together.”

“ How ? ” he answered, amazed : “ what is this arbitrary limit ? ”

“ I do not know,” she said, sighing : “ only something tells me it will not be longer.”

What had he to do, then, but, in his exultant happiness, laugh to scorn her fears, take her to his impassioned arms, declare the immortality of their union ? She was overwrought, he said, oppressed by fancies born of change and recent sorrow. In the creative fire of love all those dismal spectres would pass consumed, leaving new life and hope to spring from out their ashes.

She shook her head ; but he would not be gainsaid. The confidence of the autocrat was in him ; he read in her mood nothing but the diffidence of a young soul temporarily overweighted by its own aggrandisement. There is no reason for supposing that he knew anything whatever about the real state of affairs ; there is every reason for surmising that the truth would have been jealously withheld from him. He never once, in after months, alluded to Tiretta,

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or appeared to have kept in mind the part played by that romantic agent of his in the sequence of events. It is possible that, even had a hint of the truth been conveyed to him, he would have scorned to attach any consequence to the story. The *cicisbeo* of his day was almost as formal an institution in society as her ladyship's pet lap-dog or *confessore* ; sometimes, even, he was solemnly inducted in family conclave ; and not seldom he was quite the most harmless member of the domestic circle. The first condescension of an archduke and destined emperor was sufficient to sweep all such ephemeral fancies into oblivion.

Well, if princes must be princes in these matters, Joseph had got, let it be admitted, the best that he deserved. I think so myself. I feel a little impatient, I must confess, of that enamoured philosopher, who, having sent as it were a professional appraiser to value his fancy, could behave to her, when acquired, as if she were the prize of his most single and determined devotion.

But he was really devoted to her—even passionately so ; and if she repaid him with duty rather than affection, he was not the man or the philosopher to complain. He knew well enough that there must always be something lacking in unions of policy, which nothing but a miracle of chance could make soul-unions ; and Joseph could not be unjust or unreasonable—save, perhaps, when he regarded the quality of his own reason and found it pre-eminent.

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So he was satisfied to remain the positive pole of love to his wife's negative.

For the rest, the young archduchess did all, or almost all, that was expected of her. She was a dutiful wife, a gentle mistress, a timely mother ; and if the one babe she bore to her husband was of her own sex, not her disinclination to oblige, but nature, was responsible for the reservation.

Infanticide, by unsophisticated girls, is often due to terror and repulsion over the totally unforeseen. On a higher plane we find the fruit of lovelessness regarded by its bearer with cold alien eyes. That is far too harsh a description of Isabella's attitude towards her little infant ; yet the thing seemed oddly strange to her, something queerly remote from her own knowledge and volition—a changeling, as it were, that had been deposited by her while she slept. It attracted her ; she was curious about it ; but in a detached way. It gratified her most in its relation to the task she had set herself, and which was now accomplished. She had given a potential heir to the throne ; she had made *him* happy. Surely, now, she might look with confident eyes to her release. This poor physical residue of her had played out its part.

It had, in truth ; and so we approach the end. There is no need to linger over it, now the little ground is cleared, and the other actors in the drama are put away like inessential shadows into the back-

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ground. It is the passion of the moonlit garden once more—the rapture and the meeting.

It had been evident that the young wife was drooping ; it had been increasingly evident since the birth of her child. Always frail and delicate, marriage, it seemed, had never with her, as with some fragile constitutions, stayed the tendency to decline, but had rather confirmed and increased it. Something was gone from her, indeed, which no vital force of love could replace. She seemed to fade where she stood, like a spent lily. As the months drew on she grew weaker and still weaker. Her husband saw, but without understanding. It was a transient indisposition in his eyes. Autocrats are incredulous of death. One night at the opera she fainted. Some moment in it had stabbed her with a too-poignant memory. There was consternation then ; but she rallied—yet never to the ground she had lost, and was still steadily yielding. She grew to be the shadow of herself ; yet not so much the shadow as the phantasm. Her beauty did not go, nor her young symmetry ; only it was strangely refined, as if some light within shone through dissolving walls.

And yet she was never but gentle and lovely-sweet with all ; very patient, uncomplaining, but always without merriment or laughter.

And so one day there dawned upon her the third anniversary of her lover's death.

On that day she would not look upon her basil.

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For a week past she had put it aside where her eyes could not encounter it. There had been signs, which yet the wild longing in her heart could not find courage to verify. Now she dared not put them to the test ; she dared not risk the ruin of her hopes until the last possible moment of endurance.

It came with the dying day. In the last lingering hour of light she hurried towards the spot. Something greeted her even in the instant of her approach—something like a sweet hand held out. She gasped ; she gave one little cry of rapture so intense that God in His high place must have wept to hear it. The little bush was mealed over with fragrant flowers as thick as snow.

That night she was to sup with the archduke privately in the Schönbrunn palace. As she came in to him, he seemed conscious of some change in her which was like a startling revelation and recovery. It was the nixie of the pool he saw again—girlish, radiant, captivating. Her cheeks were like fresh roses ; she sparkled over with merriment and audacity. A little staggered at first, he rallied quickly to the delight of the challenge, and responded buoyantly to her mood. He was jubilant in what he believed to be the first definite sign of her restored health. That, and not that alone. Was it conceivable that he detected here a hint that she might come to be to him something that she had never quite been yet—something which he only seemed now to recognise for the first time as a fully achieved

AT REST

desire, a fully satisfied hunger, a perfect realisation of a dream which had hitherto lacked its best fulfilment? He thought he would sacrifice much philosophy, much pride to ensure that gain. To be to her at last not the husband but the lover! As soon as possible, that they might be alone, he dismissed the attendants.

It was a lovely moon-drowned night. The long windows of the room opened upon wide spaces of tranquil garden, whose trees and beds and slender rosaries were but soft accents on the universal glow. All liquid and milky-green, it might have been some under-world of strange waters from which they looked up, to see the bright globe just misted through that deep transparency. Somewhere a fountain falling, with a little flop and tinkle, gave voice to the illusion. The dewy lawn looked a though frosted over with moonbeams. It was a long fairy track, fading into ineffable mysteries.

Isabella sat fronting her husband—fronting the open windows. She had been talking to him, sweetly, remorsefully—as one, on the prick of departure and longing for home, might talk to a generous host whom yet one was already forgetting—when all in a moment she fell silent. Something in her face startled and thrilled him. It seemed transfigured, lit up with an immortal joy. The eyes were gazing, not at him, but past him, out into the garden, as if along that luminous track some vision were advancing into their ken. Suddenly

THE POT OF BASIL

and soundlessly she rose, and, still fixedly gazing, went swiftly past him out into the night. One faint movement he made to detain her, but ineffectually. He was conscious of an inexplicable awe—a strange paralysis of will and motion. And then he heard a cry—as it were a cry of intense and loving rapture, and, instantly disenthralled by it, he started to his feet and turned. She was running into the moonlight, her arms held out as if in a very ecstasy of welcome—and yet there was nothing there. But in the moment that he moved to pursue her, actually as if she threw herself without stopping into some spirit's lovely keeping, she pitched and fell headlong.

When he reached her, she lay in that drowning tide of light like a spent phantom of the mists. A smile of utter rest was on her lips. She was dead.

“ Fair Isabel : poor simple Isabel.”

THE END.







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